PICTURES BY VIRGIL PARICH

JOE
The Wounded Tennis Player

With an introduction by ROBERT BENCHLEY

By MORTON THOMPSON

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THE WOUNDED TENNIS PLAYER
by Morton Thompson

WE'RE NOT just blurbing when we say that this book has a rare something about it.

Morton Thompson, a young man with a typewriter full of human comedy, unfolds as funny a batch of stories as were ever found behind Hollywood screens (both kinds). Here are tales that guarantee a howl; others with a surprise twist to make you gasp; and many a casual quickie to provide laughs between laughs.

You don't even have to look hard to find the episode of the Lion Woman; or the incredible pranks of the boys in the Disney studio; or the true history of Thompson's brother, Lewie the Horse, who talked to horses that told him when they were going to win races. A voluptuous recipe for cooking turkey, a forest fire, a phantom ship, and other miscellany too surprising to give away add diversity to divertissement.

Impossible to overlook are the introduction by Robert Benchley and the mad illustrations by Virgil Partch, himself a twelve-fingered genius in a ten-fingered world.

This book is printed from the plates of the original edition. The text is complete and unabridged. The low price is made possible by the elimination of original production costs and the author's acceptance of a reduced royalty.

JOE, THE WOUNDED TENNIS PLAYER

MORTON THOMPSON

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ROBERT BENCHLEY

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THE SUN DIAL PRESS
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To my brother
LEWIS MARSHALL THOMPSON, II
Air Cadet

Killed at Kingman, Arizona,
on the seventh of January
1944.

INTRODUCTION

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I ate a turkey prepared and roasted by Morton Thompson. I didn't eat the whole turkey, but that wasn't my fault. There were outsiders present who ganged up on me.

Now turkey, in spite of its big build-up as the Great American Bird, can be, and usually is, a mighty full slice of nothing teed up on a mound of double-nothing billed as "dressing." Not so with Thompson's turkey. I am not even going to try to describe Thompson's turkey. I leave all that sexy writing to the younger men. I will say just that I decided at that time that Morton Thompson was the greatest man since Savarin, and, for all I know, Savarin wasn't as good as Morton Thompson. Could be.

So when it transpired that Thompson was going to get out a cookbook (entitled, naturally, *The Naked Countess*) I insisted on writing the introduction.

"Are you sure you'll have time, Bob?" asked Morton. "You're a pretty busy man, you know, what with your social engagements and giving swimming lessons, and all."

"I'll *make* time, Mort," I said. "I'll even slip my recipe for making time into your cookbook."

So Mort gave me the copy for *The Naked Countess* and I took it to New York with me. I write faster in New York.

That was four years ago. A lot of things have happened in four years, including my not writing the introduction to *The Naked Countess*. I just couldn't seem to get the right angle—at my typewriter. It edges itself upward and to the right, like an old crab, whenever I hit the keys. I think that my typewriter table is too highly polished. Or something.

Mort has been awfully sweet about the whole thing. He has never even asked me for his copy back. Once in a while, as the years rolled by, he would drop me a line saying: "How's tricks, Bob?" And I would answer, saying: "Just fine, Mort!" But I knew what he meant. What he didn't know was that I was in there *thinking* all the time. I lined up several approaches, but they all seemed too sentimental for a cookbook.

I got so worried about this literary impasse that I consulted an analyst, and he told me that the reason I couldn't write the introduction was that I was secretly jealous of Thompson for being able to cook a turkey so well and in my subconscious was trying to hold up production on the book. This made a little sense, except for the fact that I was also holding up production on several other projects in which jealousy couldn't have figured at all. For, if the truth be known, I have been so upset during the past four years over not being able to write an introduction to *The Naked Countess* that I haven't written anything else either. You see, I promised Mort in 1940 that the piece for him would be the next thing I wrote. And I am a man of my word. Little did either one of us think that the

next piece I wrote would be an introduction to *Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player.*

But just as an earnest of my good intentions toward *The Naked Countess,* I will copy down a few notes that I have made for incorporation into my cookbook introduction. They are just notes, mind you, and need polishing and checking. They also need a beginning and an ending, and a little something amusing to fill in between. A couple of good gags I could use, too. But the main points are here.

First, I was going to embroil Lucius Beebe and other gourmets in a violent controversy by coming out flat-footed in favor of cold food as opposed to hot food. All this screaming that goes on when food is not served piping hot is hysteria pure and simple. If a dish is well prepared and well cooked its flavor is enhanced by a session in the icebox. (Naturally I do not refer to scrambled eggs or other dishes made for the minute. Don't be a dope.) All that I have to do to prove my point is recall the smacking of lips and gurgles of delight that come from the kitchen when the family elbows its way into the icebox along about 2 A.M. and gets into those little saucers of cold string beans, canned corn, boiled potatoes, and nubbins of roast pork, veal, or ham. The only stipulation I make is that the food *has to have been well seasoned in the first place.* Mediocre food *has* to be served hot, so that the taste buds are dulled to a point where it cannot be tasted.

Next, I was going to shock all members of *Les Amis D'Escoffier* by claiming that a dish that is superb in itself is insulted by the use of more than a sip or two of wine *avec.* Anyone who would drown a delicious ragout with more than a sip or two of even Château

Lafite 1893 would drown his grandmother. For two people to consume a quart of wine along with a dish of even moderate heavenliness is not only a shocking waste of wine but shockingly bad gustation. Just as good wine needs no bush, good food needs no wine—or, at any rate, just a sip now and then. That is what I was going to say.

I have several other non-conformist points up my sleeve for the introduction to *The Naked Countess*. I mention these only to show that I haven't been just drifting along with the tide during the past four years. I also mention them to lead neatly into my peroration which involves the point that, just as viands of the first order need no vintage wine, so *Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player* needs no high-class introduction, which is just exactly what it isn't getting.

Robert Benchley

JOE, THE WOUNDED TENNIS PLAYER

Chapter I

A columnist is a reporter who got a lucky break that later turns out to be a fracture.
(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

Writing a column is hard for some persons, but it is remarkably easy for others. Mr. Westbrook Pegler spends eight hours on his daily thousand words, but Mr. Heywood Broun used to reel it right off, fast as he could type; O. O. McIntyre edited and edited and batted his brains out, but Addison and Steele just lushed along, dipping and scribbling, and once they began they didn't look up until they had finished.

Anyone who has ever written a letter to a newspaper, or meditated writing one, is a columnist or at least a potential columnist; there are as many persons walking around with the secret inner conviction that they could whang out a hell of a hot column if they only had the chance, as there are citizens. This conviction is just as firm in the man or woman whose letter in the Vox Pop column begins: "Has anyone noticed the scarlet nuthatchers (*Ilex olex*) are nesting significantly early this year?" as it is in those who begin: "I am not mentioning any names, but the person or persons who . . ." or the ones who start: "Senator Bogan in his attack on American industry has raised an issue no right-thinking American can afford to ignore. Just so long as we permit our lawgivers (so called) to insult

our intelligence with traitorous statements such as these, so long will our . . ." or the one who just starts simply: "I am getting God-damn sick and tired of noisy garbage cans," and signs himself Taxpayer. It is a fixed idea and everyone has it, just as everyone who writes interesting letters knows he could turn out a great novel, and everyone who cuts meat once a day sees no reason why he couldn't be a surgeon. The idea is, furthermore, sound. Every year somebody whose friends have been telling him or her for years that he writes such interesting letters he ought to try writing seriously sits down and knocks off a pretty fair novel; and every year there are news items about a hunting accident far from civilization and how some total amateur amputated a leg or removed an appendix or delivered a baby.

These convictions have always been strong in humans ever since someone who had never heard the word "artist" abashedly took up a flint one night when the rest were snoring and sketched a mastodon on the cave wall. For centuries there were class barriers: a blacksmith was a blacksmith and wrote no letters to the editors; there was even a period when it was indecent for women to write. But this era, from a columnist's ivory tower, is the freest and most encouraging and most creative in the world's history; not long ago a Swedish servant girl wrote a novel that knocked everybody's mouth open, and the year before a housewife tended five children with one hand and typed out a novel with the other; and the memoirs and writings of a taxi driver, a servant, a housewife, or a blacksmith have an even better sale than the memoirs of royalty or a cabinet minister.

There are not yet many new faces in the world of

column writing; but tomorrow there may be; we are still children playing in Civilization's lap with our toys, and it is just that a column, like a Meccano set, is a little more complicated and not something you can pick up and drop like a novel or a letter to the editor or a pogo stick. For writing a column is something you have to do every day. If you are an idea columnist, then every day you have to have fresh ideas—and these have to compete with the headlines. If you are a gossip columnist, then every day you have to have fresh news —and this, too, has to compete with the headlines. A thing such as a war breaking out is tougher on a columnist than a personal illness; against the backdrop of those black headlines your daily writing makes your heart sink with the triviality of it all, of anything you can write; it makes you take more time, makes you lose conviction in the importance of what you are saying, makes your joking seem ill timed and flat. Only a Bugs Baer can weather such buffeting competition comparatively unbuffeted, but even his writings seem angrier, wrier, than they used to be hilarious.

By and large, people know very little about columnists. When an ordinary mortal is given charge of a daily column he is withdrawn from casual circulation; his living alters, he makes fewer friends, the circumstances of his occupation change him, and it is terribly true that the farther he stays away from contact with those who read him the better it is for reader and columnist. He finds this out early. In his community he becomes the man nobody knows; his personal habits are hard to discover, except by another columnist, and there is an unwritten sort of law about that: columnists have frequently made war on each other in print and in person, but however embattled, columnists do

not write about the personal lives of other columnists. This is noble.

Column writing is hard; it is hardest when you actually have a column to write. It doesn't make any difference whether you write swiftly or plod; I have done mine in as short a time as twenty minutes, and it rarely takes more than an hour: if you have a column to write, that is the time when it comes hardest. That phrase, "having a column to write," is a state of mind. It means you have to write a thousand words for the next day's paper. And if you had an idea, if you were bursting with a column, why, it would be done and over with and handed in. Column writing is by far easiest when you are two weeks ahead. If you are a person who has got it done two weeks ahead, then writing a column is a confident thing and you can be smug about it and assured, and bow at people and knock it off, and your managing editor will praise you as a solid citizen. It doesn't seem to make much difference, thenceforth, whether you have any cupboarded ideas; the fact that you have two weeks' supply ahead seems to do something to you.

There was a time when I was the kind of person who was two weeks ahead. I have been both kinds of person. Now I am on leave and at stud, practically, and I can look back on it all and write a book about it. I could write two books about it and maybe three. But every book would have a special chapter about the time I was three weeks ahead and how God punished me.

I was working on the New York *Journal* at the time, doing rewrite on the night side, writing my column in the hours when work was lightest. My boss was Sterling Noel and he was then night editor and I

was living with him. Sherman Billingsley, the owner of the Stork Club, had sent him a case of small bottles of champagne to keep in good with him; for a while work was very light for me and I ripped off one column after another. All of the small bottles of champagne were flat; the corks had dried in them and you could pull them out with your bare fingers, but it was the principle of the thing. For that matter, you could stick your thumb in and shake the bottle up and down and get a very nice fizz out of it, just as if it wasn't flat at all and probably hadn't been on display so long that the best thing to do was give the bottles away to newspapermen and thus kill two birds with one stone.

At any rate, I was working on the *Journal* and mailing my column back to the Hollywood *Citizen-News,* where it had been appearing for some years before this *Journal* side job came up. And because work was light on my *Journal* shift I once managed to get three whole weeks ahead. Nothing like it had ever happened before. The most I had ever been ahead before was two days. When I got one week ahead the managing editor back in California was dazed. He immediately began sending me a daily letter, encouraging me to keep it up and telling me his personal worries, and saying almost hysterically how I, at least, had taken one big problem off his shoulders. Then I got two weeks ahead. This was too much. Abruptly he became suspicious. He became convinced I had someone ghosting for me. His letters began to contain a certain coolness.

"Don't tell me, you son of a bitch," he wrote in one letter, "that you aren't running all over New York and drunk all the time, and too busy to do that many columns ahead, because I know you. You've been my

cross for years. And tell whoever it is that's writing them for you to write subheads on them."

I had upset his notions about me; he was bewildered, and he clung to his notions stubbornly, and it made him bitter; managing editors have pigeonholes instead of armpits.

But when I got three whole weeks ahead, a matter of eighteen entire columns, a total of fifty-four pages, a sum of eighteen thousand words, he went completely out of his head. The bitterness vanished; faith took its place, humbleness and a sort of low fawning. He began to write me long letters full of religion. He said that steadiness was bound to take a man farthest in the long run. He said he had always said I was a genius; that all I needed was a governor. He said he for one had always most highly prized the man who had consideration for others, even if it was only a managing editor, and thank God there were still *some* decent people left in the world and I was one of them. There was actually a tear on one of those pages, or what looked like one; I kept that page apart from the rest and meant to keep it with me always.

Gil Hammond, at the next desk to mine, was always putting sodium amytal in Coca-Cola as a chaser for the kind of scotch he drank, and I showed him the letter and he began to cry and it got on the page I was saving. There was no particular use in saving it any more, since now that Gil had cried on it it wasn't purely personal or sacred, really, and also Gil's tears made brilliant orange blots; we wrote the American Medical Association about it, but nothing came of it.

Anyway, I was three weeks' columns ahead, and out in the West was a managing editor who loved me; nothing like it had happened in all the days I worked for the *Citizen-News*.

At this point I met a wonderful girl. She was all tinkly and full of electricity and part German and part Brazilian. I was living at the Brevoort and she was living at 1 Fifth Avenue and she had a white bearskin rug and I am a cad and it was wonderful.

I didn't write a column for more than two weeks. The day came when I was only three columns ahead. Not three weeks: just a measly three columns. Hurriedly I swung into action; I had pads of notes piled up; I was exhilarated, my pores were open, I had been observing right and left. I knocked off eight entire columns in one night. I sealed them in an envelope. I mailed them special delivery, air mail. And then I sat back. I forgot to mention that this girl had a friend. She was a wonderful person. She was blonde. She knew Hendrik Willem van Loon and she was absolutely top of the bottle although no bearskin rug, of course, and naturally I am a cad again and it was wonderful.

Three days after I mailed that precious envelope to the West I got a terrible shock. My copy of the *Citizen-News* arrived. Where my column ought to be, first column, first page, second section, were only four or five lines, in italics. They were written by my *Citizen-News* managing editor. They said that I was no doubt enjoying myself to the fullest in New York, and hinted I was dead drunk, and advised my readers that no columns had arrived, and hoped one would, sometime.

I got right on the phone. I was outraged innocence and I was indignation and I was sore. For years I had been skating in two minutes before dead line and keeping barely one column ahead, and now I had sent in eight days' worth of columns and what the hell did he

mean he didn't get them! Didn't I send them special delivery, air mail?

Followed paragraphs.

I will now tell you what happened to those columns. They were in a plane, flying air mail. The plane hit the side of a mountain. The plane caught fire. The columns burned up. I had made no copies. I was never ahead again. I drew a moral from it. Banks were made to fail and air mails were meant to crash and managing editors were made to suffer. Don't write columns ahead. Sufficient unto the day is the column thereof. I went down to a little *stube* near Astor Place and ate three dozen clams on the half shell and a glass of half porter, half beer, and when I came out I gave a quarter to the first bum that stopped me and gave up both girls and told God I was sorry and it wouldn't happen again and please lay off the mails if I sent them by train. Ever since, I have sent them by train, and they always got there on time, and I was never ahead more than one, or anyway three at the outside. They were better too. I was a good judge because in those days I was my favorite author.

I don't think it is very profitable discussing how to write a column or how hard it is for some people and how easy it is for others. People always say it must be fascinating to be a newspaperman or a columnist, because you meet so many interesting people. Nobody is very interesting. If you write a column, you have to make them interesting. If you are feeling on the beam and red-hot, then everybody is interesting. If you are just feeling average, then everybody is a lot of jerks.

It has always seemed to me most natural to write about anything; not to tie myself down to any particular phase of living; incidentally, it is the best safe-

guard against running dry or writing oneself out or passing out of style. I have written cooking columns that were reprinted and republished and even used as ambitious greeting cards; political columns found their God-knows-how way to Germany and England and Japan, for citizens in those countries wrote me about them; gossip stuff unaccountably struck responsive chords in Australia and Canada, and columns of sheer nonsense brought fan letters from South America. It's not that they were so good and it's not that I was so famous. It's just that they were columns. Every type of column has its audience, and it is ambitious to try to be all things to all men, but it is worth trying. For a long time there were even two Japanese newspapers pirating the column and paying nothing for it and pleased as Punch.

The most important thing to any columnist is being on a paper where he can write whatever comes into his head. With that arrangement anyone can make a reputation; all you have to do is write; if you just keep on writing long enough you'll say something. For a time the *Citizen-News* let me get away with murder: once a columnist wrote that his publisher was a tyrant, a bigot, a hypocrite, and a political fan dancer. Mine hadn't that much moxie. He was just a man who reached puberty safely but forgot to touch second. His help must often have been a trial to him. He let it run without comment. He was a sly bird. He waited a month, until one day I wrote a column praising the paper. I didn't even mention his name in the entire column; I didn't even praise his function. But he had that praise column held out; he didn't let it run. Instead, in the space my column normally occupied, he wrote a personal piece in which he said the column

for that day was such that it tore his heart and made him blush for sheer vanity and contained such wonderful sentiments about him that his wife clipped it out and put it in the very front of a book she kept with nice things people had said about him pasted in. He made it seem as if I had written the most laudatory things about him, and I had done nothing of the kind and had been, indeed, very careful to give him no credit whatsoever. The next week *Time* magazine came out and referred to the matter sardonically under the heading, "Ban of the Week," and said how I had made a rightabout-face. Exasperated, I made three attempts to tell my readers what had happened. Each time it was edited out. He was a very sly bird. One of the slickest men I have ever known. He said he didn't mind my criticism of him but that he was dead set against any personal praise appearing in his own newspaper. He wrote that in the column. He even got his wife to thank me.

But when a paper allows a columnist to run whatever he likes you can be sure that the columnist is going to make himself a reputation as a fearless, honest, hard-hitting, and even readable writer. And with one or two exceptions the *Citizen-News* always let me write what I liked.

As a result I was continually encountering currents. My pores were open. People respected me. For some reason they got the idea I couldn't be bought. I don't know how much this cost me, but I have always been a little stunned and reverent about it.

As a first chapter in a book of some of a columnist's memoirs, this is probably lacking around the edges in form or plot or pattern. I haven't anything to go by. It is all virgin territory, and with a virgin anything

there is bound to be a certain amount of fumbling getting started. Sometimes I think this thing could easily be a thousand pages thick, and sometimes I think to hell with it. The best thing is just ramble on, and write, and keep it moving, and let it be fun.

This is what happened on various occasions.

This is the lowdown.

Come behind the scenes with me and let us pick each other's pockets.

Chapter II

Love, Justice, and Homer are all blind; there will always be marriage, mercy, and the *Iliad*.
(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

It is trite to say that you never know where you may stumble onto a good story. But there is no other way of stating this admirable fact. It is a fact that needs stating. All reporters know it. Columnists are bowled over by it more successfully than reporters, for columnists have no assignments, and anything that happens to a columnist is nine times out of ten pure gravy. I have interviewed great men and come away with only notes on a stuffed shirt. On the other hand, I have interviewed—just on the purest off-chance—some unremarkable, unlikely, anonymous nobody, and shrugged and come away with only notes on a stuffed shirt.

In column writing it is rarely the person interviewed who provides the column for you. Nearly always it is how you feel about the subject you interview that makes the column interesting. I felt very deeply about Somerset Maugham, and when I made the date for the interview the very thought of it infected my column for days. I didn't get much from the actual interview. Mr. Maugham didn't even look like the symbol on his book jackets. All the glorious fine reading he had written welled up in me and made me

tingle and filled me to bursting, and he just sat there. He was by no means a stuffed shirt. He was by no means dull. He just wasn't Joan Crawford in *Rain*.

Toward the end of the interview he said how glad he'd be to get back to England. He had stopped in southern California for only a few days. He had come miles out of his way to make this stopover, and he made it only because he wanted to buy in Los Angeles a large quantity of an expensive and special California poppy seed, a flower of which he was very fond. He had been buying these seeds from this particular man for many years.

I saw a story in that for the city desk, so I got the nurseryman's name. But before I turned the name in I dialed the nurseryman; I asked him about the poppy seed and what kind of flowers it grew and why Mr. Maugham stopped off for it and went thousands of miles out of his way for it and what color was it and how big did it grow and how much an ounce.

He remembered Mr. Maugham very well. Said he was an old customer. Been buying the same poppy seed for years. The poppy was a beauty. Expensive, of course. The reason it was expensive was the seed had to be sent all the way from Mr. Maugham's England. That's where they grew them. Grew twice as big and twice as pretty over in England, so they raised them and sent the seed five thousand miles back to California. I never think of world travelers but I remember that.

James Hilton was one of the rare ones. He had a story. It was the story of how he came to write *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. In those days he had been a journalist, making about five pounds a week with free-lance stuff for newspapers and selling an occasional story to minor

magazines. One of them got stuck for a yarn around Christmas time and offered him ten pounds for a filler. That was a lot of money. But the days passed; somehow the story wouldn't come. Finally, about three weeks before Christmas, he holed up in a small flat and started to write. It rained steadily for five days; at the end of the fifth day he finished the story, titled it *Goodbye, Mr. Chips,* and took it to the magazine. The editor read it and was considerably upset. "This," he complained, "isn't a Christmas story!" But he hadn't time to do anything about it. So he paid Hilton and shoved the story in, and that was that; Hilton went on his way, getting a yarn here and a story there, averaging his five pounds a week.

Until all of a sudden, three thousand miles away, a fellow by the name of Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly,* read the story—God knows how or why!—and promptly violated every canon of the austere *Atlantic* by republishing it.

The rest is history. The story swept the world. Hilton became famous, reached at a single bound the pinnacle of acknowledged greatness, and at a fabulous salary came to Hollywood where R. C. Sherriff was promptly employed to write *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* so that Mr. Hilton could set to work on Mr. Sherriff's *Journey's End.*

Mr. John Masefield recited for me, "I must go down to the seas again"; this frail old man, upon whom greatness sat more fittingly than his suit. I suspect I could have gotten a better column out of him if his wife hadn't been fussing around and hustling him all over the place. He had a look in his eye that might have been seeing far billows, or the Hoboken saloons in which he swamped spittoons between the cruises of

his seafaring life. It was a Gene Fowler look if ever I have seen one. After a while a bunch of fat and thin old ladies trooped in and carried off the poet laureate of England to some new subdivision where they had him plant a tree for them. Also say a poem. It was very sad. His mustaches were wispy. His collar and his wife were three sizes too big for him.

But he was a great man. He caged the sea. He went down to it with a net of words and caged it and put it on paper and made the billows surge out of thin lines of ink. I think the best column arising out of an interview I got not from a great man, or even a notorious one, but from a man who read people's meters for the Water & Power Company. One of his daughters was a beautiful creature who danced at the Metropolitan Opera, and I was lurking up there at his house, waiting to take her out one evening, when quite by accident he started talking about a brother.

He hadn't seen his brother in twenty-five years. He did not know whether his brother was living. Something inside him told him that he was and is; reason had nothing to do with it.

The brother had been no meter reader. He had been aggressive, made money, become rich. And then his spine had been injured, on a hunting trip. He chopped down a tree. The tree fell on him. He was badly crippled, and although he had spent a great deal of money traveling from doctor to doctor during the next two years he came forth only partly repaired, equipped with the easy use of his hands and one leg, but still a cripple. A hopeless cripple.

He looked about him. He was not especially sensitive about being a cripple. He was quite vigorous. He was dowered with the poise of the wealthy; when his

great idea came he proceeded with its execution as if it were not a bizarre idea at all but quite the normal, everyday thing to do.

It occurred to him to go to San Francisco and buy a boat and man it with fellow cripples and set sail over the oceans into every land around the world.

In San Francisco he bought a schooner. It was very costly, the best money could buy, the best that skilled seamen could find for him. He had a fine motor installed in it. He had it stocked with provisions, enough provisions to feed two dozen persons for almost a year.

He was ready, now, for a crew. He went up the coast from San Francisco to Salem, Oregon, searching for crippled folk; he went to hospitals, mostly, and they gave him the addresses of men who, like himself, had been discharged in a partial state of repair. He went to the nurses; he learned from the nurses exactly what the temperaments of the various cripples were, and surely no one could tell him such things better than nurses. Then he went to see the cripples.

In a short time he had more than enough candidates. They all returned to San Francisco with him. There were two dozen of them. Some of them had hugely muscled arms but only withered wisps of legs. Others had one fine arm; but one leg and one arm would be a little worthless flap of skin and bone. Others had arms that were of no use whatever; or perhaps both arms were entirely gone, but the legs would be massive and doubly strong to make up for it.

All of them were people of courage. They had endured a great deal of agony in hospitals. They had endured much mental suffering in a world which scanned them covertly and set them apart. All, somehow, had risen above sufferings and inferiority com-

plexes; they were not warped as they might well have been because of their injuries. All of the cripples were afire to make the trip. They stayed in hotels around San Francisco as, down in the harbor, the schooner was being made ready.

There was a bare skeleton crew of able-bodied men. Just enough uncrippled mariners so that the crippled folk could operate the ship and learn navigation and the trade of a sailorman as they sailed along. Afterward the regular sailors were to be put ashore, and thereafter the cripples were to sail the boat themselves. In this way a man might leave the rut made by his wheel chair in the small world in which a wheel chair or a pair of crutches let a man move, and might someday, after many days of proud sailing with what hands and legs were left him, go down the golden road to Samarkand, or drop a quiet anchor at Trebizond or Mozambique. A ship is as good as legs or arms—and sometimes it is better than heaven.

On the day when these strange men of new hopes sailed out of the harbor the skipper assembled the cripples on deck. He told them that after they had seen the world he planned a wonderful thing. They would seek some remote island, and all of them would live on the island for the rest of their lives. It would be their island and their new world. It would be a world where no one was set apart.

Some of them cried. All of them cheered. The sails were set. The schooner nosed slowly out of the harbor. Many months later the schooner was sighted off the coast of Maine. A tremendous storm arose. Nothing was ever heard of the ship thereafter. That was twenty-five years ago. They may not have been lost. They may all have found their island. They may be there now. It must be a fine island.

That interview, that man's story, was the story Maugham should have told me, a true story about a brother of his, a story with stature and amazement and simplicity. Or Masefield—Masefield might well have told me that story.

I suppose no man looks like himself except George Bernard Shaw. And no man interviews like himself, no man whatsoever. You get a picture of that crippled chap when you read his story as his brother gave it to me. In your mind and your heart you would like to meet him. You would like to see what that man would look like, hear him talk, digest what he would say.

I wonder if his eyes had the Magellan look, the wrinkles pinched at the corners, part pain and part horizon-staring? I wonder if his voice had the timbre an idea sets vibrating? I wonder what his thoughts were like. I am glad I never interviewed him.

I have interviewed a great many people. His is the only story I think worth repeating. And, as any columnist knows, it is worth repeating for the very important reason that I never interviewed him.

Chapter III

Star: A heavenly body; a comet with a short tale.
(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

It is hard to get an idea out of the public mind. The public likes its furniture in the accustomed places. If it has been sitting on a table for many years and considers the table a chair, it is going to take a great deal of tactful and continuous suggestion to bring the public around to the point where it will stop sitting on tables and eating off chairs. And when it reaches this point, when it decides to adopt chairs for sitting purposes, it does not admit that it has been using chairs improperly all along; it simply and blandly takes the conviction that to use a chair to sit in and a table to eat off is a brand-new and acceptable fashion which it has elected, after mature and reluctant consideration, to adopt.

Mr. Tutt, in the *Saturday Evening Post,* is a definite, clearly etched character who may not be changed. Jiggs, in the funny papers, is a creature whose every reaction is known and who must not vary a hairsbreadth.

The extra, the supernumerary of celluloid, the man who, multiplied by two thousand, makes a crowd, is another public character about whom the public has its fixed picture. To the public the extra is a man or woman from a small town who comes to Hollywood to

achieve stardom and make a million dollars. He or she is a creature whose heart is broken daily by slammed doors. If it is a he, then he lives on crusts, waiting for his big chance, and, when it does not arrive, goes back to the small town, appropriately wiser, and marries the daughter of the town embalmer. If it is a she, then the perils that beset her path are concerned with things worse than gastric hunger. She is perpetually being tempted out of her wits by low fellows who offer her stardom and a million dollars if only she will join with them in a sensible physical function in which, elsewhere, they may obtain collaboration for, let us say, two dollars.

That is the public picture of an extra, male and female. It is etched indelibly in heartbreak and impossible dreams and hunger and hopeless courage and indomitable ambition.

As a matter of fact one extra in eight million succeeds to feature roles. Not more than a dozen have, in forty years of Hollywood's existence, attained actual stardom.

Few extras have had, or want, Thespian training. Few of them permit themselves ambitions beyond a fatter check, more frequent jobs. The vast majority of them are well beyond starring age and know it, and have no illusions about it. The movies seldom sell acting talent. They sell a personality who is box-office. All extras are aware of this. Long, long ago, when Hollywood was a free-for-all, when miracles were commoner than Mr. Cabell's fruit pies, when Hollywood was new and didn't know what it wanted, anybody, extra, unknown, or established stage star, had a chance. That was long ago and long over, and it is twenty-five years since the public formed its mental picture of an extra,

and fiction and film have contrived to keep that picture clear and unswerving and sharply drawn and cockeyed to this day.

There are, roughly, two kinds of extras: atmosphere and dress. An atmosphere extra can earn a minimum of five-fifty a day. A dress extra can earn sixteen-fifty a day. A dress extra looks down on an ordinary extra. In order to be a dress extra one must own dress clothing, evening gown, tuxedo, full dress. There is a sharp division in social class. Dress extras mingle with dress extras. Ordinary extras mingle with their fellow lepers.

A member of neither class hopes to become a star any more or any less than you hope to become President. Neither aspires much to anything loftier in personal fortune than a windfall of thirty days' work hand running. The average monthly earnings of all extras is considerably less than fifty dollars a month. Four days' work a month is something really special.

They are a type unsung, but this is largely because there is nothing particular in their lot to sing about. I have known hundreds of extras, good, kind, generous, sympathetic, striving persons, a cross section of America stranded on a Lotophagian coast, and they have eaten of the lotus and to the workaday world they are utterly lost and generally they are uncomplaining.

And every extra has a story. But the story of all extras will always be invested for me in the story of Eddie Gant.

When he reached home he was still soaking wet from the artificial rain in which he had been standing on the set for three hours. His home was a rooming house a few blocks from Hollywood Boulevard. He had made five dollars and fifty cents this day. It had

been his third call of the week. He had sixteen dollars and fifty cents. This good fortune staggered him. Four years ago there had been a week when he had had five days' work. That was a memorable thing. He smiled happily. He went downstairs to the landlady, knocked diffidently at her door, dutifully handed her twelve dollars. That was two weeks' rent. Farm boys are honest. He returned upstairs, changed to his other suit, tucked the rent receipt beneath a picture of Barbara Stanwyck, who had once absently spoken to him on the set, went downstairs again and out into the bright sunshine to the corner drugstore. He paid three dollars at the soda fountain, on account; his credit was good again. It was always pretty good, but now it was good again. He sighed; he had a dollar and a half left. He held it in his hand and looked at it proudly. Then he did an odd thing. He put it in his left-hand pants pocket.

There was a ritual in this. There were dreams in that left-hand pants pocket and all Eddie's ambition and all he asked of life. In the left-hand pants pocket, where he put this latest dollar and a half he had earned, there were fifty-eight dollars and fifty cents. He had been in Hollywood five years. For all that five years he had been an ordinary extra. For all that five years he had been doggedly following his star. Eddie Gant, of Valley Springs, North Dakota, wanted to be a dress extra.

It is a wonderful thing to be a dress extra; many of them do not even speak to ordinary extras. Eddie kept his shy ambition to himself. But the day after he decided upon his ambition he got a work call, and from that day's wages he took fifty cents and put it in his left-hand pants pocket and the dream began. Methodi-

cally, thereafter, he put aside fifty cents from each call.

There are too many extras. There are never nearly enough jobs. Victor Moran and Cynthia were fellow extras; they lived in another rooming house; Eddie had met them on a set when he first came to Hollywood. They were two of perhaps two dozen persons in all Hollywood who had ever noticed him or spoken to him. Nature had made Eddie an extra, a part of a mob, an average, an anonymity. Even in those early days Victor and Cynthia were dress extras. He was perpetually and humbly amazed at their condescension. That was how Eddie was; he wasn't a pusher; he didn't wear berets or slacks or bright neckerchiefs. He was secretly proud to be in Hollywood. He was glad to be unnoticed; someday he knew he would not be unnoticed. Someday he would be a dress extra. He would look back on these humbler days, and inside himself he would smile quietly.

And now his dream had almost come true. He had fifty-eight dollars and fifty cents. Do you know what that meant? It meant one hundred and seventeen jobs. Fifty precious cents saved from each rare job.

Once he had been sick. That was when there was only twenty dollars saved for the dress-suit fund. It was a hard, deathly time, but no, he would not forfeit for medicine a penny of what was in the left-hand pants pocket; certainly not on food. Fifty cents by fifty cents, job by job, month by month, always a little in debt, always broke, always alone, he had waited five full years. His face betrayed no waiting. But inside him his spirit and his soul and his mind skipped hysterically, and his heart was near bursting. When he got three more calls—only three more calls—he would

have sixty dollars; then he could buy the tuxedo and the tail-coat combination. He would walk into the offices of Central Casting. "I am a dress extra now," he would say, trying to keep his voice from trembling. He walked home unseeingly. Three more calls: it might be a week; it might be a month. . . . But only three more . . .

"It isn't as if you were using it yourself," Cynthia was saying.

His heart shook. His hand trembled on the receiver. He had only had the combination dress suit four days. He hadn't even dared put it on yet. And Victor and Cynthia were his friends. They were big people. They knew everybody. They spoke of famous directors, using the first names. They were dress extras. But his heart was full of fear and he shifted uncomfortably.

"You see," he said carefully, "I only just got it."

"I know. But Vic's not going to hurt it. He just needs it tonight. And, damn it, he lent *his* to Losh Henderson!"

"But——"

"Oh hell, Eddie! It's only a dress suit! What's the matter with you? I wouldn't even ask you if it weren't such an important call. Haven't we been friends?"

She came and got it. Eddie couldn't refuse. She came and got it because Victor was too drunk to come himself. He was home trying to get sober enough to answer the call.

"I'll bring it back around midnight." She smiled. He smiled wanly back. They were swell people. He didn't see much of them. But they weren't too proud to talk to him once in a while.

Midnight came. Victor had not returned. Cynthia

called Eddie. She was worried. The studio said he'd left the set hours ago. Eddie ran over; he was sick with dread. Somewhere in Hollywood was Victor, probably dead drunk, mussing the dress suit. It was 2 A.M. before they finally found him. He was down at the morgue; he wasn't dead drunk; he was merely dead. He had driven head on into a truck. Cynthia swooned in the morgue beside his slab; Eddie stood by awkwardly. Victor was still wearing the tuxedo; he wanted his tuxedo. But you couldn't talk about a tuxedo then; not then you couldn't! God! What was a tuxedo then! A fellow ought to be ashamed of himself. Covertly he stole a look; it seemed all right; those bloodstains on the lapel would come out. It was a little mussed. It had taken five empty, weary years to get it, and he hadn't even worn it yet.

Three days later they had the funeral. Cynthia was a weeping shadow. She stared through him piteously. Eddie dropped his eyes. This, again, was no time to ask. He stood beside the coffin. Inside him he wanted to shout, to clamor. Precious seconds were running away. In a few minutes they would remove the coffin; they would screw on the lid; they would lower Victor, still clad in the tuxedo, into the deep earth.

They would bury it. Eddie stood staring at Victor's white face in the coffin. Eddie's face was wet with sweat; his eyes gripped, tugged, tore at the tuxedo, at the corpse. They were going to bury it; the enormity of it clawed at him agonizingly. It was five long years. It was a hundred and twenty lucky jobs. It was heart's desire. It meant not ever being an atmosphere extra any more. It meant the world of a dress extra. It meant life; it meant Hollywood. Rebellion jerked his head up. He opened his mouth; breath crept through his set teeth.

"I want my tuxedo," he said.

No one heard him. Everyone was oblivious. In a corner Cynthia sobbed softly. Friends were patting her numb shoulders. The undertaker was removing a wreath. No one was paying him the slightest attention. There was only the sound of sobbing. Eddie looked down at Victor in the coffin. He looked away. He walked out of the undertaking parlor.

It was a bright day. Eddie Gant of North Dakota stood on the sidewalk a moment looking numbly up Hollywood Boulevard. Far down the street a theater marquee gleamed with starry, tinsel promise. He put his hand in his worn right-hand pants pocket. He made a ritual of it. He took out fifty cents. He put it in his left-hand pants pocket.

A hundred and nineteen calls to go.

VIP

Chapter IV

Lo, the poor war correspondent: no man can write a noise like a corpse or a cannon.
(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

A psychologist once told me, unless it was Lee Gershwin, that the yearnings and emotions and morals and moneys of people were different all over the world, but there was one thing which was common to all the higher animals, everywhere. The French are a highly civilized people but their morals are considerably different from the equally highly civilized English right next door. The virtuous Indian taught his children to steal and the virtuous Puritan taught his children that the difference between murder and killing was that it was murder to kill a Puritan. In Africa there are god-fearing tribes who never name their gods and who worship with a fidelity unmatched in the cathedral towns of Europe, who count premarital chastity among their girls an absolute disgrace and a shame to the community. In certain countries of southern Europe feminine unchastity is punishable by death and banditry is a respectable profession. Mohammedans have plural wives and strict prohibition. America has many laws and many morals and the great American sin is getting caught.

All over the world things are different, and what is respectable one place is a shame to the jay birds in

another, and everybody has a god and worships according to local ground rules and lives according to local ground rules and looks down on people who haven't the same god or the same ground rules.

But the one thing that is constant in all the higher animals is a sense of deference.

Dignity is the least common denominator and the greatest common multiple. Everybody has dignity and everybody has deference and everybody fights to protect it and augment it, according to the specie of the locality. In North America you used to be able to command respect with sea shells. In France, for a time, it was a headdress that towered higher than anyone else's. You can speak disparagingly to a dog and it will slink away, shamed, and even a cat occasionally brings a dead bird or a dead mouse to the doorstep just to show what a hell of a fellow he is. Thieves have their honor, and dogs have their day, and every human, everywhere, is working day and night to accumulate those things which in his locality augment personal dignity.

I know a man in Santa Monica who is the greatest collector I ever heard of. He is a millionaire. Some millionaires collect fine paintings. Others collect first editions or stamps or wives or beautiful mistresses or Western boots. This man collects everything. He has an enormous house and it bulges at the seams with the collections he has piled up in it. Anything you name—he collects it. He's got coins, buttons, furniture, stamps, old stoves, antique keys, gems, rare flowers, insects, and bottles. The minute he hears about anything new he starts collecting it. He's got millions and he just sits there and collects everything. Happy as hell.

I can remember when there came a time in Hollywood when merely to collect money wasn't enough to guarantee standing in the community. Naturally art was one of the first things collected. The Edward G. Robinsons filled their walls with Derains, Matisses, Picassos, El Grecos, Halses, Romneys, and Gainsboroughs. Their tables and mantels staggered under statuary by Despiot, Rodin, and Braque. They redecorated the whole house. I remember reading a piece about it in *Script*. The piece glowed and writhed, impotently trying to limn such grandeur. At the end the author was limp. He summed it: "The whole effect can simply be described as *gemütlich*."

People saved dogs, and celebrities, and Hugh Walpole was imported and before he was exported wandered one day into Stanley Rose's combination bookshop and picture gallery. There was an exhibition by Toulouse-Lautrec. Walpole was definitely interested. "Nice work," he nodded. "Local boy?"

The striving for dignity and deference through collection of global minutiae is nothing new, but when a thing hits Hollywood it comes like Sunday night at a Holy Roller revival. It hits high, low, and middle. It hits even the relatives.

I had nothing to do this frabjous Sunday afternoon so I went along to this Sunday afternoon party. It was at the home of a prosperous businessman. His brother was a well-paid studio writer and some of the glory, God love them, seeped over, and he and his wife were keeping up the family honor and people were calling on them that never, never would have called except that their name was the same as this Hollywood writer's. Not me, of course. Me, I go anywhere. But the afternoon bled away and soon only a select

coterie of forty-odd were still staying on waiting for dinner. And after dinner we all went into the living room and there were plenty of chairs and in a little while somebody gave the host an opening. Nobody knew it was an opening; it just turned out that way. It was something to do about pictures, and before anybody really knew what was happening he was urging his wife to show us her collection of mezzotints. I think most of us who trooped obediently out into the halls and from room to room thought we were being ribbed. They were copies and plainly marked so, and the subjects were too much even for calendars. But we all praised them numbly and it was a good thing we did, because she was deeply in earnest about them and had paid as much as seven dollars for one of them, without the frame.

When we got back into the living room she joyfully demanded that he bring out *his* collection. Well, it turned out to be coins. They weren't currency coins. They were two or three dozen of those commemorative things they strike off for fairs and battles and expositions, about as rare as fish in a government hatchery, and any one of them might have cost as much as three dollars, and all of a sudden I remembered how rich he was and the poor cut of beef at dinner and the thin pats of butter and how proud he was of his brother, the writer, and what a sacrifice it must have meant for them to collect those things and not have their house full of wonderful underling sales executives or rival manufacturers, but a Hollywood mob instead. And even while I was thinking that, and the pity was welling up warm and reproachful in me, he was asking me politely if I didn't have a collection too, and I was saying yes—yes, I collected trusses.

I could have bitten my tongue off, but I couldn't pull out, it was too late, it was that cursed mind of mine, and there was the baby of a big hurt being born back of his eyes and he began to smile uncertainly and I had to rush on with the wretched thing and talk animatedly about trusses for fifteen minutes and the hurt look only began to fade away when I promised to bring over the one Marie Antoinette wore and show it to him sometime, and talk about the various qualities of leather pads in the trusses Homer and Ulysses wore. I wound up with a scornful snort about the Germans as a nation, so far as ruptures are concerned, from the standpoint of an old truss collector and I don't know how I got out of that house to this day. He still believes me, for which I am sincerely grateful. He has told hundreds of people I collect trusses. I saw him at an elegant restaurant a few months ago, and he democratically shouted to me over the din of the diners, asking as one collector to another how were my trusses coming along and he had something great to show me and when was I coming over.

Sometimes money will not buy deference, but a collection almost always will. I haven't any collection. But since that incident I have never been able to pass a medical-supply window without stopping to see what's new with the ruptured. At first I used to chuckle inside when I looked at the trusses. But do you know, the last year or so I have begun to study them with deep interest. I mean, there must have been ruptures in those days, and the Egyptians were damned clever, after all, and who is to say they maybe didn't have trusses too? And as for Marie Antoinette, who knows anything about Marie Antoinette? They

aren't expensive either. Not the used ones. And they wouldn't take up as much room as organs or pianos, or even books.

Romberg, for instance, saves pianos and organs. If I ever drown, in the panorama that flashes before my eyes in the last second, there will be the troubled days when I was being an adviser to the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers on the West Coast, during the time when ASCAP was fighting the radio networks. I will hear again Wolfie Gilbert hoarsely and libelously assuring the aloof Jerome Kern during a directors' meeting that at least three Chinese tongs were even then chasing the sedate Rudolf Friml up some dark alley on account of Friml's penchant for employing feminine Chinese secretaries.

The attendance at weekly directors' meetings was almost always perfect. The absent one well knew that he would be torn limb from limb by his fellow foremost popular composers and lyricists, in every particular, starting with his golf, leering happily about his morals, and always ending with the probable source of his last song hit. I will drive again to Del Monte with Rommy, surely the sweetest, gentlest, and most generous soul alive, and hear about his early days in Vienna marching around as a soldier, and all the romance of Vienna will come again in Rommy's halting, inarticulate speech and he will stop the car in every small town to put in a long-distance call to his wife. And he will talk gently about rich composers and poor composers and of how Reginald de Koven, who wrote "Oh, Promise Me" and was a class AA member of ASCAP, never used any of the money that flowed in from his composings because he came from such a rich family, and of the opera he wants to

write someday, and a thousand unmalicious things about music and the people who write it that I never even dreamed of.

It wasn't only Rommy. Every man I ever met in ASCAP seemed to know every song that had ever been written and could tell you right off the lyricist, the composer, and where they stole it. Wolfie Gilbert would tell about the old days when he and Berlin and quite a few other big names were singing waiters and the mobs were about and a man might get a hundred-dollar bill or a poke in the nose for singing some song. And Leo Robin liked to remember he was a newspaperman, and how brash he was to go to New York and try to write lyrics, out of a clear sky, and Friml traveled all the way from China when he learned of the Big Fight because he wanted to stand by Gene Buck, and the magnificent Italian dinners served by the redheaded Irish wife of Calabrian Harry Warren, and Harold Arlen singing his own songs in half notes. I want to live it again, because when they tore each other down it was always exultantly and it was always funny, and the highest would tear down the lowest; it was completely democratic and there was never a dull moment. And there was always music. And individually they were the kindest, nicest, most-anxious-to-be-helpful people I have ever known. All lovable, all great, and all nuts.

But the only story I can remember from that year is one they didn't know, most of them. A song is a songwriter's uniform. Gus Kahn, you say? Oh yes. "My Buddy." Hammerstein? "Old Man River." Arlen? "Stormy Weather." It's a songwriter's trademark and his medal and usually the source of his present life and position.

Carrie Jacobs Bond's song is "The End of a Perfect Day."

Other members of ASCAP rarely see her. She lives a secluded life, high on a lonely canyon overlooking Hollywood.

Carrie Jacobs Bond's shy, quiet son, whose frown made her heart pale, whose smile made her eyes wet, grew quietly to manhood, handsome, without a care, without a problem, a shy, mild man, withdrawn and serene. They found him one clear, late California afternoon, seated at the piano, a bullet through his head, a gun dropping from his slim fingers, a copy of "The End of a Perfect Day" in the piano rack before him.

It was the song to which she owed everything.

I don't think I have ever seen two people more in love than Julie and Alec Templeton. He has even invented a complete language in which they carry on a running conversation about whatever the hell they talk about, and I gave up trying to learn it when after much patient coaching I discovered that the word for something desirable was "ugvie." But although they are very happy, Julie has a woman's curiosity, and all their courting and married life she has been plagued by one perpetual question. All their life together, Julie has been tormented to know what she looks like in Alec's mind. She never discussed it. Not with Alec. She talked about it shyly to their friends, the Bonellis, and to Marion Telva and the Freddie Jagels. But never to Alec.

Until one morning, out of a clear sky, the question came up all by itself.

It was at breakfast.

"I dreamed about you last night," Alec said happily. He took a sip of coffee.

Julie moved the toast nearer to him. Her heart gave a great throb.

"Did you, darling?" she said coolly, fighting down exultance.

"Oh, it was a lovely dream!" He smiled a lover's sighing smile.

She buttered a piece of toast for him. She put it in his hand. The great riddle was about to be solved.

"Tell me, Alec," she said easily, "what did I look like?"

He turned an indignant face toward her.

"What did you look like? What did you look like?" he echoed, outraged. "Why, just like you *always* look, of course!"

Fantasy is for remembrance and the odor of it is sharp as the smell of the first girl's hair. Before I die I will always remember that in 1940 I was operated on for appendicitis. I had an extraordinarily vivid dream while I was under the anaesthetic. When I came to I was weeping bitterly. And when they asked me why I was crying I confessed it was because we had lost the Philippines. It was so very real to me and so ridiculous that I wrote a column about it in those peaceful days a full year and a half before Pearl Harbor when Singapore was the bastion unassailable and Japs were houseboys and the mantle of the name of the United States of America was an impregnable magic over the rock of Corregidor and the not yet dead of Bataan.

In those days I barely knew there were such things as Philippines. I never gave them a thought; they were the least things any of us thought about in 1940.

I wrote the column just to show how ridiculous a dream could be and to poke fun at myself for the amusement of my readers.

I wish plaintively that Dunsany or Wilde or Coppard had met head on the story of the Lion Woman. Many and many a story too fine for a column comes into a columnist's purse. Like the whale, swimming through the ocean with his mouth open, he swallows the rare along with the commonplace. His digestive juices do the same justice to the goldfish and the minnow.

The Lion Woman was an ex-circus performer who lived and died in a small rural town in Oregon where I once edited a weekly paper. She was very poor. She had been an acrobat and she fell and the fall crippled her and although she did not limp and she was not deformed by the accident she could no longer do the only thing she knew how to make her living by and the years had given her a few meager savings and these she lived on. Perhaps her mind may have been jarred by the fall. She passionately loved animals. The small community did not know what to make of her: she was an outlander to begin with, a circus person to add to this, and to cap the bizarrity she did no work, lived in vigilant seclusion, and acted strangely. And one day she locked the small frame cottage she lived in, next to a railroad track, and went away. While she was gone men came in from a near-by city and built a cage behind the house. It was a long enclosure, heavily guarded by iron bars, and it had a cement floor. When she came back she returned late at night. The next morning there were two lions in the cage.

One was very old and the other one was sick. She

had bought them from some circus. The cage, the lions, must have tapped her slender resources almost to nothingness. But her days were full now. Every day was a fight about something: the noise the lions made, the menace to the community, the disregard of the health laws, the efforts of tax collectors to collect taxes, meter readers to get close enough to her house to read the meters—every day was a battle. Once they tried to put in a sewer line and she stood off the surveyors with a rifle. The sleepy little village imprecated its councilmen, held mass meetings, wrote letters to the governor, and was delirious with joy.

But it was grim for the Lion Woman. She had so little money. The lions had to be fed. They were expensive to feed. They ate as much as six men. She had a battered old car. In this vehicle she used to forage the countryside. She drove hundreds of dusty miles. She paid no attention to traffic and was given dozens of traffic tickets which she contemptuously ignored. She kept her attention for the side of the road. Wherever she found the body of an animal that had been run over she stopped the car, crooned compassionately and heartbreakingly over the body, wrapped it in a tattered strip of carpet, and put it in the back of the car for her lions. She haggled endlessly with farmers over the dead bodies of horses, cows, all kinds of livestock. She developed a sort of special protective instinct which led her unerringly to the very farm, however many miles away, where some animal had died.

It became increasingly hard, for all that, to find enough for the lions to eat. Once, for four days, they got nothing. She was distracted. She went to the town council and demanded relief. They listened to her

coldly, but with enormous interest, and I remember that one member of the board invited her to speak before the Rotary Club. She left, furiously angry, and they were satisfied.

Then one day there was an odd report at the police substation. Neighbors of the Lion Woman had complained that the lions were now roaring intolerably, roaring all night, keeping the neighborhood awake and the darkness hideous. There was a postscript that the Lion Woman had also taken to sheltering tramps, that her home beside the high railroad embankment was becoming a regular tramp refuge. It was a hopeful little postscript, as if to say, Here, you can trip her up this way, maybe.

Those were the years of unemployment. Many men were adrift, walking like wounded and dying animals from tie to tie across the continent. She was a resolute, fantastic woman. She must have had many visitors from the iron highway of the desolate. At any rate the lions no longer prowled gauntly in their small enclosure all day; instead they slept the sunny California days away, their ribs filled out. Their mistress foraged still, but she no longer sought for things so small as a cat.

The next police report said deprecatively that she had been warned the lions were keeping folks awake at night, and told she must not foster a nuisance by making her home a refuge for tramps. And then there were resolutely no more reports.

That was years ago. The lions are dead now, I suppose. Perhaps the Lion Woman is too. And in any case there are few enough tramps and no unemployed walking up and down the railroad ties over the nation. As for me, I assure you, I know no more about it than

the police did. It wasn't my business to investigate. And what was there to investigate, after all?

Long ago I came to believe that the only perfect crimes are committed by nations. George Antheil does not agree with me. I remember one night at dinner the question of perfect crimes came up and everybody was fascinated with it all through the celery. I can't remember the name of the actress, but there was a particularly hot crime in the headlines just then, and she demanded Charles MacArthur's opinion of it. It was a double murder; a mother and daughter had been driving along one of those endless, lonely Texas highways, and the bodies of both women were found, side by side, alongside the road, a few feet from their parked car. They had not been attacked. The daughter had been clubbed over the head and her throat cut. The mother had been stabbed, then shot. Nothing had been stolen from them. Their clothing had not even been badly disarranged. But shoes and stockings had been taken off both women. And their feet, the soles of their feet, had been burned.

Altogether it was one of those mysteries which sell papers and keep people talking all through the celery for days. The actress was avid for details. MacArthur wanted to eat his soup. She kept at him to give his opinion as a veteran newspaperman, to unriddle the riddle, to tell her how the crime was committed.

"All right," said MacArthur finally; "the mother killed the daughter."

"My God!" said the actress. She looked around the table to see if everybody else was My God! too. She leaned forward. MacArthur fixed her with a beady eye. Her lips parted.

"The mother," MacArthur continued impressively,

"hit her daughter over the head with the limb of a tree, bending the limb down for the purpose."

The actress sat back, wide-eyed.

"Ah! That—that is why they didn't find any weapon!"

"Yes," assented MacArthur gravely. "After she beat her to death she cut her daughter's throat with string, sawing thus"—he demonstrated with his napkin on his throat—"and when she had finished she swallowed the string."

The actress was spellbound. Her eyes were as big as her bosom.

"And then," said MacArthur reminiscently, "the mother simply stabbed herself with a spring from the upholstery, let it fly back in place, staggered to the side of her dead daughter, lay down beside her, shot herself, and hid the gun."

He commenced eating his soup. The actress rocked back and forth in her chair, checking his story point by point, nodding as each item fell into place, her mouth still open.

Suddenly she stopped thinking and whirled on him.

"Wait!" she cried. "Their feet! Who burned the soles of their feet?"

MacArthur shrugged. He lifted another spoonful of soup.

"Oh," he said quietly, "passers-by."

And I will always treasure, because I had so much wonder writing it, the story of the newspaperman and the girl on the park bench, the nearly perfect column of a story that happened fourteen years ago.

It was after midnight and in Astor Place in New York City, around which most of the city's newspaper offices were then located; the rain was steadily

soaking and resoaking the shabby clothes of a young girl seated on a park bench.

With the exception of this solitary small figure the small park was entirely deserted. If there is a destiny it allowed a tired reporter to start home an hour early that night, and because of it, head bowed against the downpour, he spied the huddled girl. Curiosity, pure reportorial curiosity, fought the rain and won. He changed his course. He slogged to the girl's side.

"What's the matter?" he began.

It came out slowly.

"Go away!" she said at first. But slowly, then faster and faster, it all came out.

It wasn't much of a story, really. As stories go, it was pretty old. It began in upstate New York, in a small factory town with a couple of Old World parents and a young girl's desire to seek her fortune someplace where there weren't only factories and squalor. She had to run away to seek that fortune, and Old World folks being what they were, she knew she couldn't drag herself home again, shamed, beaten, and an object of eternal mockery. She was a proud girl; she had a lot of pride.

And New York knows what to do with pride. It can have a special sort of chill for ambitious young folk; at the best it ignores their existence, at worst it has a special sort of laughter at their expense. She couldn't get a job. She couldn't get a job anywhere. They just laughed at her lack of experience. They giggled at her clothes. They mimicked the way she talked. And she tried again. And she tried again and again and again. And now it was finished.

That afternoon her last ten cents had gone for carfare. She hadn't eaten in three days. She had no place

to stay. She had no place to go. It was over. The city laughed softly in the rain. The girl wept.

It will not surprise you that newspapermen, like prostitutes, doctors, lawyers, and other folk who deal with the basic facts of life, are sentimentalists. The reporter helped the girl to her feet. Urgently he told her he was a boy from a small town himself. Burningly, eloquently, he summed New York—the world—as a place full of people only too ready to help, to lend a helping hand.

"I used to feel people were laughing at me and making a mock of me, myself," he said soberly, "when I first came here. But it's wrong. And you'll see it."

He gave her his card. He told her to come to the newspaper office next day and he'd have a job for her before nightfall. He felt in his pockets. There was just seven dollars left from his week's pay. His hands fumbled the bills. Humanity won. He fished out five dollars.

"Take that," he said; "consider it a loan. Get yourself a place for the night. Get something to eat. Come see me tomorrow."

Sobbing, smiling, then sobbing and smiling again, the girl walked happily off through the rain toward the yellow light of a subway entrance. The reporter looked after her a moment, then he looked hastily around to make sure no one had witnessed his kind deed. He pulled down the wet brim of his hat, shrunk from his wet clothes, and trudged on homeward.

His phone rang earlier than usual next day. His city editor got him out of bed. There had been a gang killing. He had to go down to the morgue to see how many of the dead he could identify.

He wasn't in a very good mood when he walked

into the morgue. He had a cold starting, and he was up two hours ahead of time. He started walking down the aisles, staring into faces, the morgue attendant close behind him. When he had walked past perhaps a dozen slabs he came upon the body of the girl he had befriended the night before. He halted, incredulous. He stared. Then, without a word, with rebellion and protest and rage in his heart, he resumed his walk down the aisles of the dead.

The morgue man came up alongside.

"Know her?" he inquired professionally.

The reporter walked straight on.

"Never saw her before in my life," he said.

"Very interesting case," the morgue man said hopefully.

"Fine!" said the reporter insultingly.

"Brought her in about three-thirty this morning, they did. Fished her out of the East River. Drowning case. And what do you suppose she had clutched in her hand?"

The reporter halted, whirled at bay, hands on his hips.

"A locket!" he grimaced bitterly.

"No," said the morgue man. "It was a counterfeit five-dollar bill."

Chapter V

> Mankind is infected by hope, pestered by it, fevered, tortured, swindled, dropped, busted, mended, willy-nilly set on again; have you ever noticed how calm a man is and untroubled and happy when he is asleep? That is because he is not hoping.
>
> (From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

There are one or two columnists in America who do nothing but column. They get enormous salaries. They employ secretaries, news-gathering staffs, pay office rentals and heavy taxes. Their money comes from syndication: a company sells their column to as many newspapers as possible, charging each newspaper according to its circulation, and paying the columnist on the basis of what he brings in.

These are the gentry. They are few and there may never be their like again, for column writing is a chancy business. There was a time when a daily column was a phenomenon in world life but, like the bathtub, the cornflake, and the aspirin tablet, the novelty has long since worn off and Addison and Steele are dust and Eugene Field is a name and Rumor's tongues are coated.

The gentry are a habit. They have long ago outlived the device that made them famous. Fashions in columns change. No one took McIntyre's place; no one will take Winchell's; no one will take Mark Hellinger's. Perhaps there will never be a gentry again. In the meantime, in every city with a daily

paper there is a local columnist. Usually his wages encourage him to supplement his stipend with outside jobs. Almost all columnists have at one time or another in their careers done outside work; it may be a radio program, or a script, or a spell of publicity, or they may have written political speeches or become producers, and one of them even took time off to be President. Fellow by the name of Harding. Knocking off stuff for a little Ohio sheet, town of Marion, figured he could hold down both jobs, and the next thing his family knew he was President. Something must have been wrong with the job; perhaps it was not all that he expected; at any rate the word got around, and from that day to this no other columnist has put in a bid for it.

As for myself, I have had my share of outside jobs. My memory is a reprehensible memory. And the prodigies I saw while I was a feature writer at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer are mostly forgot. I remember interviewing a beautiful, very young French girl, newly imported by Metro, the dust of France still upon her slim ankles; I interviewed her through an interpreter and I used the studio's interview chart, and when I came upon the question: "Favorite sport?" she said: "Sex!" And she returned the same answer to all the rest of the questions with the exception of "Favorite color," to which she replied, "Arrow."

I remember spending so much MGM time with Rosalind Russell and Robert Montgomery and that few things are so exhilarating as the professional charm of an actress or actor; they remember every line of every play; they are a vast fund of the best and most fashionable in humor; they are never at a loss to produce the proper drollery at the most proper

time. There was a bitter war then raging between them. Their wit sparked and blistered at each other through the most assiduous smiles. I remember the day when Monty Woolley edged onto the set. Benchley was in the picture, and Montgomery: both had known Monty in New York. Monty looked pretty seedy; he needed a job. There had been a bit part for him in the picture. The director, George Fitzmaurice, had that very morning canceled it out. We sat in Montgomery's dressing room on the set, and he and Benchley sent for Fitzmaurice. Benchley manufactured a fine, funny situation for the script, a situation which called for Monty. Benchley wrote the part in. Monty got his job. Benchley, Montgomery, and Roz Russell all in the same picture; that set was the best place in the studio. You never knew what fresh hell had broken loose.

Montgomery's dressing room was next to Benchley's, and next to Benchley's was Roz's. I remember the day I brought in a small square of pink velvet and sat there pondering it while Benchley and Montgomery sat silently side by side studying their script. Woolley appeared in the doorway. The day before, Roz had sent Monty an accusing wire signed by the wife of a most important producer. The day before that Montgomery had started to trim Monty's beard as he slept. Monty had awakened screaming. He stuck his head cautiously in the doorway.

"Hello," he said warily.

"Hello, Monty," I said absently. Then I stared back at the piece of velvet as if it vexed me.

"What you got?" he said suspiciously.

Montgomery and Benchley looked up.

I extended the square of velvet toward him.

"Does this feel like velvet to you?" I asked unhappily.

He took it gingerly. The two Bobs followed every move now.

"Yes!" he said, fingering it. "Certainly," he said, irritated, "certainly it's velvet!"

"Feel it!" said Benchley.

Woolley rubbed it over the back of his hand.

"That's no test!" I said.

"Try it on your neck!" commanded Montgomery.

Woolley rubbed the velvet on his neck.

We stared at him. Silence fell.

"What's the matter?" he cried.

We simply sat there, staring at him.

He looked at the square of velvet. He flung it from him as if it had been a snake.

"What have you done?" he shrieked.

We stared at him, expressionless.

"You shouldn't have rubbed it on your neck," Montgomery sighed finally.

"My neck?" he cried. He tore off his tie.

"It's too late," Benchley said judiciously.

"It's spread," I said sadly.

He tore off his coat. His shirt followed quickly.

"You touched your shoes," Benchley said sorrowfully.

"You been touching yourself all over," lamented Montgomery.

"You beasts! You unspeakable, unspeakable—please!" he begged, ripping off his trousers. "Tell me! Tell me what to do!"

"Get 'em off! Hurry!" Montgomery implored.

Less than ten seconds later Monty Woolley hopped about the dressing room mother-naked, his beard

waggling like a catcher's mitt, screeching like a seminary. I don't know which screams were louder, his or ours. But the next moment Roz, attracted by the uproar, rushed eagerly into the doorway. The expectant smile on her face sagged instantly into a gape of utter disbelief; then she covered her eyes and ran away hollering bloody murder.

Now, are not these trivial and terrible things to remember from a whole year in the largest and richest studio in the world? I cannot help myself. It seems I am doomed to recall in life only that which is worthless. My conscience does not know any better, and the great are only poems, stories, inventions, salaries, parts, and I chide my memory for being honest but, like my conscience, it has no sense at all.

I remember shepherding Ilona Massey and Hedy Lamarr and Rose Stradner, when the three were imported all in one batch, and how violently they spoke of each other, all except Ilona, and discussed old scandals involving the others, and none of them were getting any money, for they had not been allowed to take any out of Europe and the moment they arrived in Hollywood the studio had put them all on layoff and they were alone in a foreign land and desperate lest one of the others get the first picture, the first break.

Well, it was Stradner, and she cooked wiener schnitzel to celebrate it, but the picture did her little justice, after all, and happily she married Joe Mankiewicz, a fine chap, a producer, and they are happy and she has retired. And Ilona sang and was beautiful, and she couldn't quite star; she was a sweet womanly girl; she married Alan Curtis, an actor, who used to pose for all the Arrow collar ads, but now they

are not married any more. And Hedy moped and mourned about Metro, and grew thin, and borrowed cigarettes, and her small contract was running out, and one of the cruelest things about a studio is that when you do not seem in favor everyone avoids you, fearing it may be contagious; fearing to be seen giving the enemy aid. Until Metro, glad to get back a little from their investment in her, lent her to Walter Wanger, a small independent producer, and for him she did *Algiers*. In a breath, in the next breath, she was the toast of Hollywood, star of the world. Gene Markey promptly divorced Joan Bennett to marry Hedy, and then in a little while they split up; she is still a name; she may still be a star two years from now. Joan Bennett married Walter Wanger. (To conserve wear on tires, says the OPM bulletin, you should criss-cross them every thousand miles.)

When I like a picture I see it often. I saw *Nine Days a Queen* twenty-three times. I will go anywhere to see it, to this very day. When Cedric Hardwicke walked down the corridor as Warwick I came apart like a quartered watermelon; for me this is still so. Metro imported him from England and as usual did not immediately know what to do with him. There is nothing quite so friendless or baffled as an actor in such case; to me he was the greatest actor in the world and he was lonely and we spent days together. We would go on the back lot, where the cowboy films are shot, and back of these deserted scenes he would walk down the corridor as Warwick for me. Over and over and over again. I could never get enough of it. I used to pick a dusty place so that his footprints would leave a mark and then shamelessly, in front of him, try and try to imitate the exact walk, stepping

carefully in each print. I didn't in the least want to be an actor; I just wanted to learn that walk. He coached me and posed me, hour after hour, but I could never do it. And yet, with his back to me, in his shirt sleeves, his trouser cuffs rolled up, his brown oxfords showing, he had simply to take a step—a single step, mind you—and in that instant the shirt sleeves disappeared, the trousers, the oxfords, the twentieth century, and he was Warwick, kingmaker, walking down a castle corridor to the deathbed of Destiny and dying Henry.

For me there is no finer actor than Cedric Hardwicke, and hereabouts I have seen them all; he is the finest actor for me, for he gave me what stays memorably with me as the finest in acting.

But one day I came into my office and found him seated there. His face was red. He said little. He often sat there and I worked at whatever had to be done and then we would go out and walk about and talk. This day he interrupted me. He said that he was leaving, that he had enough. He had come from the office of Hunt Stromberg, ex-newspaperman, great producer with a certain reputation. It was said of him that he had created more character actors than anyone else in Hollywood and that he did this simply by letting juveniles, come to see him on appointment, wait until they grew a beard. It applied not only to juveniles but to everyone. He had made an appointment with Hardwicke. Hardwicke had sat in the outer office for more than an hour. Finally he had left.

I tried to tell him Stromberg did that to everybody, meant nothing by it, tried to tell him it didn't mean anything; he was new, unused to Hollywood, I didn't want him to blow up, ruin his chances. Stromberg

was big, overworked, a thousand claims on him. . . .

He looked at me. He looked down. He turned his hat in his hands.

"The King," he said quietly, "did not keep me waiting."

I shut up. I remembered, then, that he had been knighted. England was six thousand miles away, and in a flash I saw what each baffled day had brought to him.

He left for New York the next day. Few at Metro knew he had gone until some weeks later he began to smash New York records as the star of *Shadow and Substance.*

There is not much I remember of Columbia, except the day when Everett Riskin excitedly outlined to me the plot of a picture called *Here Comes Mr. Jordan,* and I told him frankly he would be a fool to make it.

At Twentieth Century-Fox, writing a picture for Mark Hellinger, I remember the spectacular French toast in the commissary, and long afternoons listening to Leo Robin and Ralph Rainger. And listening to John Ford outline the plot of *How Green Was My Valley,* and telling him frankly he would be a fool to make it.

There was never any limit to the quality or quantity of goings on at Disney's. The second day I was there a fellow who could have played fullback for the Cardiff Giants if they could find a helmet small enough to fit him was sitting on the running board of his car, crying. In a circle around the car, gibbering and capering like the children of the Seven Dwarfs, were four undersized animators, a fat director, and a half-dozen assorted painters, sound-effects men, and

writers. The circle was running, hopping up and down, squeaking, laughing, hollering its head off. The huge man, seated on the running board, weeping, was a top-notch animator. He had a passion for cars. The car was his own. It was brand-new. In the back seat was a wheelbarrow. It was full of water.

Such minds.

It had taken them half a day to buy the wheelbarrow, get it into the back of the car, and fill it with water. Most of those four hours were spent simply getting it in. At midnight the poor chap was still trying to figure out how to get it out without spilling a ruinous flood over his brand-new upholstery. He got the water out finally, and then it took him until daylight to get the wheelbarrow out.

One of the animators—at Disney's the animators are the Law and the Prophets—had forty yards of railroad track in the back yard of his home. On the track was a real full-size engine and a coal car; he saved for eight years to buy it. Every night after work he would go home, mount the cab, ease off the throttle, move down the track fifteen yards, which was the end of the line; then he would halt, whistle, and back up fifteen yards to the other end of the line. He was mad about it, it was a passion with him, he lived for it; when I left he was planning to put in ten yards of curve. Another animator, paid two hundred and fifty dollars a week, spent every penny on stamps, had no car, ate a frugal sandwich for lunch, bought castoff clothes, lived in a four-dollar-a-week rooming house in Los Angeles, and collected travel circulars.

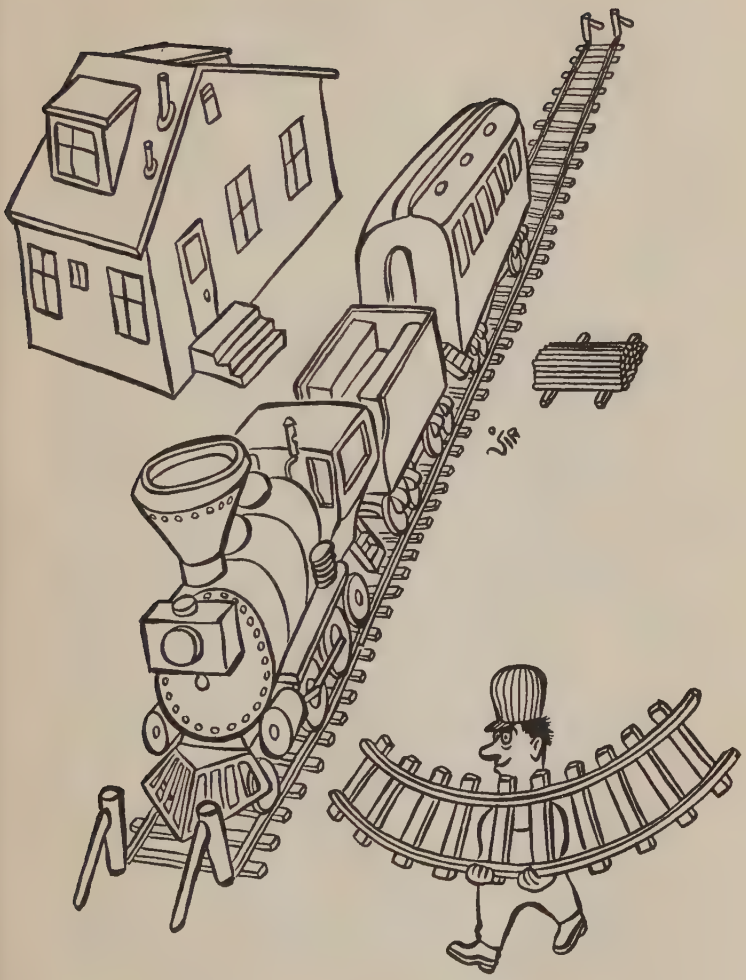
There was never a dull moment. One day a couple of hundred top animators, writers, and directors sat in a projection room with Walt to watch the result

of an important and costly experiment. In the darkness a zealous in-betweener opened a box of moths he had been saving for an occasion. Thousands of the creatures fluttered promptly for the beam of light from the projection room; it took two days to exterminate the last of them.

A few days later Walt came on a group of men around the same in-betweener—an in-betweener is an artist who completes an animator's dashing strokes—and found them watching him intently, watches in hand. His pant leg was rolled up. Around his bare leg was a copper wire, and the wire led upward to his trouser zipper, was threaded through the metal, and passed thence out the window down to the ground, two stories below, where it was attached to a film can, half full of water. They had persuaded him that he had electricity running through his body, said it was a common enough phenomenon, especially with him working on celluloid all day. Then they sent for a couple of experts from the sound department; these in turn sent for experts from the electrical department; all hands gravely rigged him in the special run-off wire from his fly to the ground, and now they were taking down learned scientific notes on the result as he worked.

Happenings at Disney's had sudden twists to them, loftily above tacks on chairs, scornful of pails of water over doors. There was mentation to them and trim craftsmanship, fanatic to the detail. Some of them were awesome.

The studio hired a young English chap. He was thin, spectacled, earnest, literal, and full of health foods. He had absolutely no sense of humor whatsoever, including the British. The studio watched him



and brooded; the possibilities were infinite. And at last genius flowered.

Each day he brought to the studio a skeleton lunch, two pieces of bread, his own teapot and tea; at noon he went to a grocery store a block from the studio. There he bought a bottle of milk and a can of fruit for dessert. He kept a glittering can opener among the pencils in his desk. He kept a special set of small towels to wipe it with, and these towels went out to the laundry at precisely noon of each Monday in each week.

Two weeks after he was hired the boys in his department chipped in and bought out all the groceryman's canned fruit and an equal quantity of other canned goods. Then, with the groceryman in on the deal, they took all the labels off the cans of fruit and put them on the other canned goods they had bought. They put the result back on the grocery shelves and waited for nature to take its course.

Noon came. The chap looked at his watch, snapped it shut, put it back in his pocket. He took his hat, brushed it, set it carefully on his head, and walked carefully to the grocery. He bought a can of peaches. He brought it back to the office. He opened the can. It turned out to be baked beans. He stared at them; then he stared back at the label. "Peaches," said the label. It said, "Peaches." He shrugged. Thoughtfully and methodically he ate the beans, the whole can.

The studio was outraged. Cooler heads suggested that he thought the beans were a sort of dwarf American peach, unknown in England. Wait, said the cooler heads, wait till tomorrow.

Next day he bought canned pineapple. He opened the can. It was full of sardines. He stared at it a long

time. He frowned; he looked away. Again he looked at the label. His eye said, "Pineapple." He smelled the can. His nose said fish. He was entranced. He forgot to eat his lunch. His tea cooled untasted. When the lunch hour ended he was still staring at the incredible can.

They kept it up. One day he would buy canned cherries: the can would contain hash. The next day he bought plums: the can contained chow mein. He bought canned grapefruit that turned out to be Vienna sausage, switched cunningly to blueberries and confronted spaghetti.

Finally the Englishman confided the story to one of his department fellow workers. The confidant was amazed; he persuaded the Englishman not to write an article about the phenomenon, as he intended, but to send the item immediately to some columnist. That, he explained, was the decent, the American way of doing things.

The Englishman nodded gravely. He pondered. Suddenly his face lighted.

"Ripley!" he said. "Haw! That's the one! I shall send it to Ripley."

"You like Ripley?"

"Passion of mine. Positive passion."

"Send it to Ripley then."

"I shall!"

"Full account, mind you! Don't skimp! Don't miss a thing!"

The Englishman spent the rest of the morning penning a neat, labored, precise, six-page letter to Ripley. Lunch time came. He sealed the letter. He addressed the envelope. He put on an air-mail, special-delivery stamp. He brushed his hat. He set it squarely on his head. He walked to the corner mailbox. He

mailed the letter, clicked the lid three times to be sure it had dropped. He walked across the street to the grocery.

"Got nice pears today," said the grocer.

He bought a can of pears.

He went back to his office. He got out his can opener. He wiped the blade carefully with a clean, fresh towel. He opened the can. He looked at the label. It said, "Pears." Then he looked into the can. There were no pears inside.

There was nothing in the can but a corked test tube.

He stared awhile.

Then he reached into the can and took out the test tube.

He gazed at the test tube.

He looked back at the can.

It said, "Pears."

He looked at the test tube. He pulled the cork. There was a note inside. He read the note. It said simply:

I don't believe a damned word of it.
Signed,
ROBERT RIPLEY

The poor devil is still working at the studio. He has told everyone in the place about it, and nobody will believe it. To watch him sidling up to a newcomer to tell his miracle tale is a thing for the Book of Ruth, full of pathos and frustration. Twice a year Walt used to encourage him to relate the whole thing from peaches to test tube. Each time, when the Englishman was earnestly through, Walt would dig him in the ribs, wink at him, and say admiringly: "Great kidders, you English!"

He will get married someday just to have someone to tell the story to, and he will have children and tell it to them, and they will tell it to their children, and someday one of them will go to work at Disney's, and they will pull the same thing on him.

Cornelia had her jewels. A columnist's children are his days. He has so many children he forgets most of them. Cornelia can have her jewels. I would like to live over again almost every one of my side-job days. I would like to regain, mint-new and about-to-happen, the day when Jimmy Stewart told about going to England for a quick tour, and how Montgomery, who was then in the throes of going completely British, begged him to visit him at noon; and how Stewart, finding the baronial castle Bob had bought, or rented, was ushered into a long English hall.

"Hi, Jimmy," called out Bob.

He was standing in the center of a shaft of light from a tall, mullioned window. About him puttered two busy tailors. They were measuring him for kilts.

I would like to pull back as though it never happened the day when Roz Russell, asked by a panting group of studio visitors where they could find Bob Benchley and what he looked like, pondered, then told them decisively, "Bob Benchley looks exactly like an unmade bed."

I'd like to report for work early to hear again Bob Benchley straggling off the set after twenty minutes under the klieg lights, his garments utterly wilted, sweat sloshing from him in puddles, crying out hoarsely:

"For God's sake, get me out of these wet clothes and into a dry martini!"

Cornelia, your jewels are paste. . . .

Chapter VI

Television: Something to put on a radio so that folks can see things are really as bad as they heard they were.
(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

The layman is invariably impressed by the inexorability with which a daily column comes out daily. It marvels them. "How in the world do you do it, day in, day out, every day? Where do you get stuff to write about?"

Any honest columnist is privately taken aback by this question. He hasn't the slightest idea; years of being asked the same question give him a stock answer. Otherwise he just stands there, floundering, groping like crazy for a smart comeback which will be wittily in keeping with his title of columnist, coming out eventually with a vague, "Oh, I don't know. It's like anything else. You get used to it."

After a while I changed this to: "Oh, it's like street cleaning. It's hard at first. But you pick it up." Once or twice I tried to give an honest answer: I said it was habit. I said that any housewife who daily prepares a menu and cooks it and sets it on the table and manages somehow to keep each day's menu a little different from the day before and tasty and nourishing and honest was just as remarkable as F.P.A. or Sir Roger de Coverley or Pegler or St. Mark himself. I said that if you asked her how she managed to get

out a menu every day she would be floored to provide an answer; she wouldn't know; she would say, "It's just habit, I guess."

I long ago came to the intimate conclusion that the quality of a column is a matter between the columnist and his viscera. There are days when you stumble onto the grandest kind of material and it has no more effect on you than a glass of warm fish. You consider it moodily; sullenly you make a column out of it. There are other days when the littlest damned thing, a nothing, a sudden breeze, an odor, a remark, just the day itself, will set you flailing away at your mill, taut and delighted and unerring as the Recording Angel. Then you make something trivial seem important. I think when you do this you fulfill the highest principle of human destiny and that two-thousand years of life on this planet have never produced anything more important; I suspect that is as far as God goes.

Somerset Maugham said that he had seen the most exquisite fit of melancholy and keen, brooding writing dispelled by a simple liver pill. Melancholy is merely a symbol for an un-British frame of mind; he was speaking metonymically. Every columnist can revise at least one golden line of Shakespeare: there's nothing either good or bad but belly makes it so. Two ounces more trypsin, a grain and a half more bile, an added inch in the sag of the colon, and Keats would have been a minor poet. Merely a couple of insignificant gallstones have tipped the scales toward mediocrity instead of genius. The brain is a muscle which reacts to the soul. The quantity and quality of its reaction depend on the amount of fog on the mirror; I have had the steam arising from a duck dinner obscure the outlines of one of the finest, most heart-

breaking, tinglingest phrases that ever rocked the mind of man. I cannot remember what the phrase was; it is dim in me like a newborn child's memory of heaven. For memory's sake I call it simply Tallulah. Tallulah Horowitz.

It is folly to fling back the record of consumptives who have made fine writers; any sick person makes a good writer, or has at least the initial premise invested in him; when a person is bodily ill he perforce takes care of himself, and some of the healthiest persons I have ever known in mind and soul were sick persons; their thoughts don't have to drain through the garbage of yesterday's meal.

I am not the least bit interested in dietetics. The sight of any raw vegetable unsexes me. I regard health faddists with loathing and speak of them with contumely. But I know that when God chooses to make us immortal He will do so simply by removing our digestive tracts.

I was about to go on and tip a knowing wink to the Egyptians, whose first step in preparing a corpse for heaven was to remove the viscera, but the minute I thought of Egyptians I remembered my mother and what I had started out to write this chapter about. Whenever my day was tautest I somehow got around to writing about my mother. She has never failed me. There has always been a column in Mother.

A faded clipping before me describes my mother as "a pocket edition of the Venus de Milo." The clipping, dated May 12, 1913, is from the New York *Herald*. The phrase occurs in an article describing her paintings. In the next paragraph my mother is quoted as saying: "The Venus de Milo is a fat old thing. Venus de Milo was nothing but an overly plump woman of thirty-eight. Who wants to be a fat old Venus?"

Mother was an artist. Some of her paintings are still on exhibition in notable Eastern galleries; one of them is in the White House. She made her mark as an impressionist, as one of that school's American pioneers. Then we came along, myself and my brother, Lewie the Horse, and she gave up painting as a career. But it has always left a vacuum in her, and over the years she has filled that gaping, eager spot with more damned things than you can imagine.

Gene Fowler loves her and takes her out to Ciro's and talks to her over the telephone by the hour and three times he has proposed to her. But Gene doesn't have to live with her. She is the most reactive person I have ever known; she can shift beliefs as blandly as turning a page; her brain is never still, never without a fascinating new belief.

There are two things, for instance, which ought to be kept out of the daily papers, and one of these is matter concerning sunspots and the other is news of the Will Rogers Memorial.

Each of these reacts violently on Mother: she is allergic to them. As far back as I can remember Mother has been allergic to something. For a time she swung violently to the sect that believes All-Good is contained in leafy vegetables. There was then the Sulphur-Bath-for-World-Purity Movement; she espoused this reverently as her prayers. Then there were, in quick succession, Yoga, Buddha, Rain-Water-for-Cooking, Internal Baths, Trumpet Conversations with the Beyond (of which I remember Mother blew a hot trumpet and amazed even the spiritists), Table Tipping, Bahai, and an engineer chap who held classes to prove the hereafter was simply a triangle cosecant to an Eternal Circle with a left-bladed charge of positive electricity in every golden carrot.

I remember that when it was spirits we all lived on tea and health foods. This, she explained reasonably, kept us in a highly receptive state to contact the beyond. A body clogged with numbing meats and side vegetables, gorged upon pies and rich soups such as my mother makes when she is not allergic, is no fit body to receive the music of the spheres. That was her fiat and she abode by it. Unfortunately Lewie the Horse and I also had to abide by it. She would have nothing to do with logic; she scorned it as an instrument by which man seeks the downfall of woman.

"What do I have to eat this stuff for? I don't want to talk to any boogies," Lewie would complain.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Suppose They should happen to be listening while you said that!"

"Lewie and I don't believe in them, so how can they listen?" I would interpose, in my head-of-the-house, reasonable manner.

Instantly her mouth would prim.

"That's splendid!" The scorn was feet thick. "Wonderful! Sitting there! A big lout like you teaching your own brother to be disrespectful to your own mother!"

This would instantly precipitate indignation and more logic. It ended always with gruesome greens being set before us, as scheduled, and Mother saying darkly that when she was dead and gone maybe we would appreciate her and wish we hadn't been so disrespectful to her and mean to her when she was alive.

There is never a dull moment in our house, and my mother is always allergic to something, and you can hear us for blocks.

Every time a paper carries a boding item about sunspots my mother looks serenely about a universe she expects will be destroyed at any moment and she will be destroyed at any moment and she will be there gloating over it and smiling that smile of hers and saying, "Don't you wish you'd listened to me?" She is on intimate terms with God and when that day occurs she will smile knowingly at Him and wink and say, "Here's my two, the ones I kept telling You about; they aren't much, really, dumb and disrespectful to boot. I guess You better let them in." I wouldn't want to be in His shoes if He doesn't.

The smallest item about a sunspot gives her intuitions. It's no good being reasonable about these either.

"It's just a sunspot, Mother. A quirk of flaming gas. What's a sunspot got to do with prophecies?"

"Never mind! I know all about you, Mr. Know-It-All! Don't think you're putting anything over on me. How much money did you lose three weeks ago playing poker?"

"What's that got to do with it?" (God knows how she found out.)

"I know a lot more than you think I do. Hah! The egg teaching the chicken!"

I am the egg and she is the chicken.

"Just because the paper says sunspots doesn't mean the world's due for catastrophe. What do you say things like that for? People will think you're one of those crazy cultists!"

"Cultist! It's getting so I don't dare open my mouth in my own house. The whole place is full of smart alecks! Can't I talk, even? What do you want of my life?"

This last is a rhetorical question. After that the

atmosphere becomes silent, strained. A quarter hour passes.

"You ought to write a column about Hitler." This out of silence, out of absolutely nowhere.

"What for?"

She nods her head slowly, cunningly.

"I'm just telling you, that's all!"

"Don't sit there and look significant. Why should I write about Hitler?"

"You'll see. Don't say I didn't tell you. Scoff all you like. Someday you'll find your mother knew best. Yes sir! Who takes care of you when you're sick? Who'd put up with you for five minutes if they had to live with you?"

"What's that got to do with Hitler?"

It's the sunspots. It comes out gradually. During that fifteen minutes of silence she has been sitting there mulling it over in her mind and she has come to the absolute conclusion they can have but one significance. Somebody is going to put the shovel on Hitler. This takes twenty minutes of explanation and shouting. At the end of this time the leg of lamb is burned to a crisp. I keep it in the oven a few days, just as an object lesson; it keeps her quiet for a week. She is inordinately proud of her housekeeping.

The mere mention of the Rogers Memorial is sufficient to ferment purest fury. Imperceptibly, fury by fury, news item by news item, she has acquired a fixed belief: she is convinced that sponsors of the Memorial are keeping milk from the mouths of hungry children. My mother loves children.

"The idea of throwing thousands and thousands of dollars into a stone monument! A dead, lifeless thing! God is going to punish them! Someday they'll have

to answer for it. Think of the milk it would buy! Think of the children, starving! Write a column about it! That's what you ought to do instead of that silly stuff."

She is as bitter about it as she is about white sugar, which she regards as pure poison, and Hitler, and women who let dirty dishes lie around, and Dali and surrealism.

One of the immutable laws of nature is that everyone has to have a mother. The distinction between mothers lies in the capital M. Sharks and the crustaceans, as well as a lot of other living things, are born of mothers who do not deserve a capital M. These creatures eat their young. They do not tell them how to do things or explain to them how life works and why it is always best to hang up your coat because someday you will get married and then you will be ashamed to watch your wife picking up after you. A shark will eat its young every time. A whale generally litters and the hell with it. A shark can always be told by a triangular fin. Luckily whales do not walk. A walking whale is the louse of this world.

One of the ways my mother passes on information is through intuition. A year ago one of her stanchest stand-bys was the good word of a boogie by the name of Laughing Sam, an Indian chief who came from the beyond to whisper sage counsel in her ear, who had a warm word for Gerber's spinach and spoke in a mixture of Algonquin, Ugh-Ugh, and occasional outbursts of high old laughter. Her faiths are upset time and time again. There is always a new one waiting for her. Because of her faith, her limitless energy, her scorn of her own pain, and her exquisite credulity and courage, she does not long remain downed. I

envy my mother from the bottom of my heart. I know that tomorrow she will be flushed with indomitable verve, that her maternal heart will be full of sad, sincere pity for the helpless boogies of the warring dead, grappling, somewhere in the hereafter, problems beyond Stalin, beyond Hitler, beyond the need of a man to fight for his earthly faith.

I know that in a few days she may be trying to organize a committee for the aid of the Russian boogies and that during the height of this commotion I will be wishing very bitterly that she had been a shark and eaten me as soon as I was born. I envy her. I think she inhabits the only real world any of us are likely to know. I wish I lived there.

There was no more furious woman in the world than Mother on the night of a Republican presidential convention. She adores Roosevelt. When Senator Borah died she told us with many a doleful shake of the head that it was only to be expected. Borah had opposed the President. He had it coming to him. To Mother, the result of the election was as foregone as Ecclesiastes. There was no need for the Republicans to hold a convention at all. The G.O.P. convention made her rage.

The radio was turned on the night of the convention, and news of the G.O.P. rally was coming in from the very floor of the convention itself.

"What's all the noise?" Mother asked suspiciously.

"Shh!" said Lewie the Horse. "That's the convention."

She listened for a while in silence.

Finally she burst out irritably, "What are they *doing*?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all! Just electing a President, is all!"

"Don't be pert, Lewis," I reproved.

"Well, how can you hear anything with her asking questions I already told her about?"

"Pity a person can't open their mouth around here. Where do you think you are—in Germany?"

"Sh-h, Mother. I want to hear this!"

"Shh! Shh! Shh! That's all I hear around here, morning to night. Am I a leper? He said it was going to be a broadcast about a convention."

At this point the chairman in faraway Philadelphia began to poll the state of Arkansas. Each loyal Arkansawyer arose obediently and announced how he, personally, had voted, by announcing the name of the man he had voted for.

"What are they doing now?" Mother asked suspiciously.

"They're polling a state's delegates. Seeing how each man voted. All the delegates get up and each man says, 'I vote for Taft,' or 'Dewey,' or whoever. They don't say all that. They just say: 'Taft,' or 'Willkie,' or 'Hoover.'"

One after another the Arkansawyers were saying Taft. They were self-conscious. They all said it in the same tone. This was a mistake.

"See?" Mother cried triumphantly. "It's the same man!"

My mother thinks all Republicans are thieves, panders, drunkards, adulterers, and fat slobs who go around stealing the country blind. I do not know how she privately adjusts my being a Republican and a very conservative, Tory, reactionary Republican, to her fixed views on the subject of Republicanism. We have had only one talk on the subject. It ended inconclusively, with the following statement: "After I'm

gone you'll find out. After I'm dead and gone." Since most discussions in our bomb shelter end on this Delphic comfort, I cannot truly say that she actually believes I am a Republican. I suspect she feels I am merely being irritating, after the manner of anything that once wore diapers and now unaccountably wears trousers.

The radio blare quickened; the Willkie boom had begun. Mother, by now, was a violent partisan. She had forgotten these men were Republicans, and she was in there pitching for the underdog. The underdog at this point was the bumptious, rapidly fading Boy Scout, Thomas Dewey, whose crown of thorns, thoughtfully burbanked, was pressing gently upon mankind's brow with a double cross of $36-an-ounce gold. With every vote for Dewey, loudly and exultantly echoed by Mother, who was now quite daft politically, there would be a terrific stream of votes for Mr. Willkie. And every time Willkie got a vote the packed galleries let loose with partisan screams of approval.

"Cousins!" shouted Mother. "Listen to them! Everyone that's hollering is his cousins and relatives! That's Republicans for you! Listen to them! Thieves! Stench!"

"That man Dewey you've been taking sides for, he's a Republican," I protested.

"Cousins!" snarled Mother implacably, as if she hadn't heard.

"How do *you* know they're cousins? How can you sit three thousand miles away, not even knowing what convention is going on until we told you, or who is being nominated, and all of a sudden decide you like somebody you hate and anybody against this guy is cousins?"

That was Lewie the Horse, and the approach Socratic.

Mother wasted little time with Lewis. She withered him with the stare with which she removes snails from rosebushes and overcharges from the laundry bill.

"Smarty, eh? Listen to him. The egg is trying to tell the chicken!"

The discussion languished. The convention blared on. Mother sat in silence, listening intently, an occasional sneer flitting across her face for Willkie noises, a bright approving smile for every Dewey mention.

It was not until the convention was finally over that Mother realized they were trying to choose a *Republican* candidate for President. Simultaneously it was borne in on her that whomever the convention nominated would oppose Roosevelt.

From that point on she demanded repeatedly and hysterically that the radio be turned off. It was, frankly, heresy. It was un-American. She had never heard of such a thing. She leaped instantly to the conclusion that such conventions were new laws, passed snidely by the Republicans while our brave President had his back turned.

She muttered about it for days afterward. She mutters about it to this day, and she will bring it up out of a clear sky and pounce on it and work herself into a blind, vindictive passion. Nothing we can say will persuade her that such conventions are sound American procedure. She appraises us contemptuously. We stand there with books in our hands.

"When I think," she says in her someone-will-have-to-pay-for-this voice, in the second octave of her Armageddon tone, "when I think of the poor children—

when I think of the milk that could be bought out of the money spent for that convention! . . .

"And any woman with a mother's heart in her—who would allow her man to spend that money—knowing this . . ."

Mrs. Willkie, in indignant conclusion, is a snip.

My toast was burned for mornings after. Burned to a G.O.P. crisp.

My parishioners, over the years, got to know my mother fairly well. She sometimes would not speak to me for days, after I had written one of my occasional columns about her. She would call up most of our friends to inquire, pained, if they had seen the dirty lies I had written about her. She said I made her ashamed to go out on the street. But the column my parishioners esteemed the most and pasted away was a true one; so true, not even she ever denied it very heartily. It was the time my mother burned the beets.

She had wanted for a long time to visit the mystery of the beyond and the stars and the inscrutable planets at the Griffith Observatory. High on a Hollywood hillside, it is a smaller model of New York's famed Hayden Planetarium. As in New York, there is in the Griffith Observatory a majestic inner room, large, full of mystery and science and glittering weird objects; the kind of room Mother would like to tidy the remainder of her life.

In this room the lights go out after a brief lecture. The chairs are so disposed that you look at the ceiling. At first there is only impenetrable blackness; then the ominous dark and mystery come to a crisis. Little lights flash wonderfully overhead, and you are staring at the vault of heaven itself.

Lewie the Horse and I had no wish to sit through

this. We went around pushing buttons and making science throw a magnetic ring from one pole to another and watching cross sections of earthquakes and making lights glow over chemicals. Mother rushed breathlessly into the lecture room. The massive doors closed behind her.

The darkness came. Her glad heart was in her throat. She was a million miles away, soaring in outer space. The lecturer had just come to the planet Uranus. At this point she remembered, sitting there, surrounded by heavy breathing, the constellations flashing, cosmic rays bombarding marvelsome complex coils on the lecturer's dials, that she had forgotten to turn out the gas under the beets.

She shut her eyes. She drew in a long, shuddering breath.

Instantly she smelled them. Overhead ponderous planets flashed and moved through the glittering firmament. Cassiopeia beamed in a jeweled cluster. She thought if she hadn't left the lid on there was a chance it mightn't be so bad. On the other hand, if she had not left the lid on the water might have boiled up and over the side of the pot and perhaps it had fallen in the flames, put the gas out. In A.D. 800 a great emperor named Charlemagne was winning the largest empire in civilization's history. On the eve of the crucial battle which was to resolve him as history's conqueror and change the entire destiny of the planet Earth the heavens looked like this: Mercury was there, over by the horizon. And the Twins blazed brightly near by. And Orion's mighty belt of stars peeped just so over the castle battlements as Charlemagne pondered the planet's destiny. In that event, of course, the house would be full of gas. This would be better

than the house burning down. Although the rest of the meal, waiting in near-by pots and pans, would unquestionably be ruined by the odor.

It is one thing to be sitting in a semidarkened planetarium and to realize the beets back home are burning. In a theater it is no trick at all to rise precipitately, to run up the aisle, to flee home in time to cheer on the firemen.

It is quite another thing to be sitting in the very womb of Science, lapped in the towering dignity of its darkness, surrounded on all sides by intensely concentrating fellow seekers watching the mighty panoply of heaven move under the awesome proddings of the lecturer. Even if the roast itself were burning you couldn't rise then; the crushing stares of indignant, tranced neighbors would reduce you to a shamed grease spot long before you could even start fumbling for a door whose location was utterly unknown.

Two thousand years ago three wise men traveled through hamlet and desert. They were guided by a star. The star shone upon the manger. Slowly, slowly the stars sink below the horizon. They arrange themselves in new patterns. And suddenly the eerie cosmic-ray pointer of the lecturer has flicked upon a single brilliant gleam. The light of the world. The light itself. This was the position of the stars in the heavens of that magic night, the lecturer says. This—this was the star. The ineffable Star of Bethlehem. The very star as it shone over the manger. He had rolled back time to show you this. Mighty time itself. Of course, if they are just burned clinkers in the bottom of the pot it will be all right. Even if the pot is ruined it won't be so terrible. But if the pot has melted . . . ! If the red drops of molten metal have plunged down

to the tindery floor . . . ! You can smell the smoldering linoleum. It is about to burst into flames. You can see the house a heap of charred, smoking ruins, and the neighbors clamoring, and the police taking out their ominous, accusing pads of evidence paper.

She had a confused memory, too, that the Great Bear is part of Venus and that the moon revolves around Betelgeuse because of a vast spiral nebula which millions of years ago threw fiery clinkers across the heavens in a majestic shower of burned beets.

When the massive doors were unlocked at last Lewie and I were waiting for her outside, bored, all unconscious of the pit into which she had descended during the cosmic lecture. She was very pale. She filled her first ten minutes of freedom with bursts of hysterical giggles. All the way home, as we took turns stabbing her with the enormity of her dereliction, she alternately wept and screamed with eldritch glee. And when we reached the last agonizing block, when we turned the very corner of the street on which we lived, there was not a fireman in sight. The house was still standing. There was no smoke issuing from doors or windows.

The whole house reeked of burning beets, however. And the pot itself had to be thrown out. And damned if she didn't stand right there and burn the tops a few minutes later.

That was an epic day. We never have done needling her about it. For years she has had no comeback. Lately, little by little, she is beginning to blame the whole thing on science.

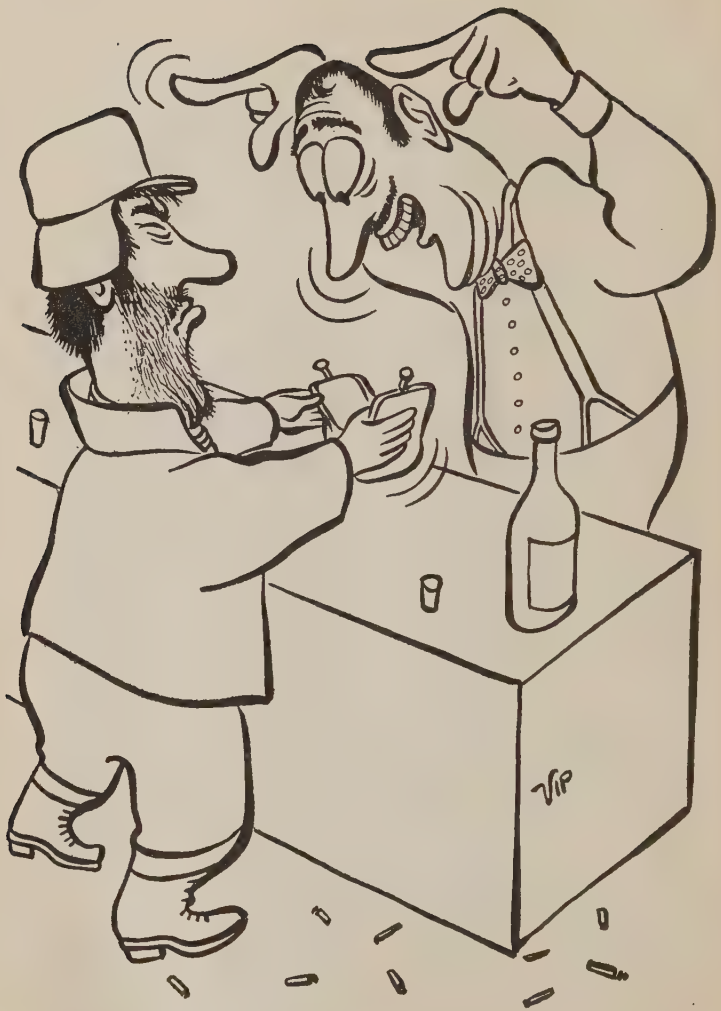
"Science!" she sniffs tentatively. "Science, so *called . . . !*"

Chapter VII

> It isn't often I can talk in favor of humanity. As a rule I am against it. The trouble with human nature is that there are too many people connected with it.
>
> (From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

Life's minutiae are appallingly interesting. I dote upon newspaper filler items; to me they are always hotter, more eternal, than the headlines. I read them with interest, profit, and joy. A headline, after all, changes from day to day; it is an unstable, ephemeral message of flux; it does not stay with you. But those little filler items are facts—stark, propsome facts. Also they are invariably engrossing. What the public wants is news, not facts. I used to be very scornful of this public taste, of the way the public devoured cooked-up stories, were made delirious by sloshes of ink siphoned to the thinnest line of adulterated fact. I know now that the public is aware it is deceived; that it wants the daily show a newspaper affords; that it is quite well aware of the sober facts and the opposing thin, adulterated line and wisely chooses to read anything that will make the dullness of daily existence seem ominous and important and stirring.

My anodyne also is ink, but my dose is smaller. I am delighted to discover: "The phrase, 'How Much Can You Raise in a Pinch?' originated in barrooms of '49er days. To pay for his drinks a miner would open his purse to the bartender, the bartender would thrust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in a thumb and forefinger. The price of that drink was all the gold dust he could raise in that pinch. 'How much can you raise in a pinch?' was a question saloonkeepers naturally asked any bartender who applied for a job."

I am stunned with joy to learn that I have been calling my typewriter a "mill" all these years, not because it grinds out copy, but because the typewriter was the invention of a man named Mill. I muse musingly over the item: "Czar Ioann Vasilyevitch, better known as Ivan the Terrible, possessed an unusual amount of learning, was first to set down the doctrine of autocratic government by divine right, and was the author of a religious tract attacking Lutheranism."

Few headlines can fascinate me as this does: "An old law of Los Angeles County makes it illegal to shoot deer from a moving streetcar or to hunt quail in a cemetery."

The obituaries of most of us on this planet are printed in just about this much space. It does not make us insignificant. Brevity is the soul of life—and of death. There is a whole novel in a two-inch clipping before me, a brief legal notice. I shall call the man William Cenci. It was not his real name, the name by which Hollywood knew him, nor, before Hollywood, New York. It is an entirely true story. I have been at pains to trace and piece the facts to present them as they happened.

The physician at the county hospital hung up the receiver with a small, absent clatter, like the patter of feet behind a stretcher.

"Get me the morgue," he said, exasperated. "Get me Mathis. Have him come up."

The nurse shifted her feet uneasily. "There isn't any doubt, is there?"

The physician waved at her nervously.

"Get me Mathis. Let's know where we stand."

She lingered a moment, looking at him expectantly.

He shrugged at the phone, helplessly.

"It was him again. Christ!" he burst out suddenly, "I don't *want* to tell him! . . ."

She went to her desk telephone.

Presently Dr. Mathis came in.

"Well, Mathis," said the physician, "what about it?"

The sharp wind of early autumn skipped briskly over the bay of New York, blowing the salt-freighted breath of the Atlantic waves into the nostrils of the land, blowing the sound and the scent of the sea over Battery Park. There is an infinite sadness in such a wind; it sings of loneliness; there is the scent of escape in it. There is a tense plucking about such a wind that causes men to lift their chins and to stare unseeingly at man's first love, the horizon.

William Cenci moved his spare form fastidiously on the hard park bench. Two pinched lines appeared irresolutely on his narrow, ascetic face, running a rigid course from his thin nostrils to the corners of his sensitive mouth. He felt the wind; and as always the deeps of him leaped to escape with it. It was winter. He stared out beyond the whitecaps; he looked longingly about him at the snow and the brimming whiteness of it.

He was sixty-one years old. His expensive, quiet clothes, a certain austerity of poise in the cold blue eyes beneath his white forehead made his presence on the Battery bench a little bizarre.

William Cenci was going away; he was about to uproot himself forever from the city of New York. He had lived for more than twenty years in a small Park Avenue apartment. His beloved collection of rare books was already packed.

He did not want to go away; but then, all his life he had done things he had not wanted to do. He had lived with a gentle decorousness, a man always on guard, a lonely man of fixed habit and an invisible fierce pride. There was something alien in the soul of William Cenci.

William Cenci was going West. He had precisely six hundred dollars; there was no longer a place for him in New York City.

The people of his generation were gone; the brownstone houses gazed tiredly between the slits of dusty boarded windows at a new city. Fifth Avenue was an old beldame staggering haplessly up from Washington Square, a bundle of garment-factory dresses over her blue-veined arm. In England the last of the great writer-poets of William Cenci's generation had died a fortnight past; William Cenci had known him well.

The Marchioness of Stoke-Sembly, whom Cenci had danced with, Keith Brownell, the dramatist, discovered by Cenci, and three other great names, great in his generation, had died within the past three months.

All of them had known William Cenci, as much as anyone had ever known him; he was their friend and their equal; he was their kind, as here in New York City the Van Schaicks and the Derwents and the Van Rensselaers were his kind.

Behind William Cenci's pale, well-bred, expressionless face was a profound love of life, of fragile things

and gentle colors and infinite music. He was a silent man. He lived lonelily, even with himself. There were few in the New York City of this white, snowy day who knew the tall figure, and those few who knew William Cenci did not know him at all.

He was going West, now, because two years ago a man at a dinner party had suggested to him that so brilliant a writer belonged in Hollywood.

"There is more money out there than you ever dreamed of," he said proudly.

William Cenci smiled politely, uncertainly.

"The motion pictures are always on the lookout for new talent," the man urged. "A chap with your terrific background, with your fine reputation as a writer——" He interrupted himself, awed. "Why, man, we've got to have you!"

He was a producer, an important one. He wrote his name on a card.

"Someday you'll come out," he said simply. "Come straight to me."

"I should be honored," William Cenci said quietly, "but at present——"

"Don't mention it!" the producer said fervently. "Just come! Any time!"

Only three days later, as it happened, William Cenci resigned his long-time job as one of the editors of an important metropolitan paper. For months he had been brooding over the thought that he was a pensioner. He had occupied his high position with the newspaper for almost twenty years; he was valued there for impeccable craftsmanship, uncanny erudition; for nearly twenty years at the office he had been distinguished as a kindly, courageous, silent gentleman,

forever punctual, forever courteous, and unfailingly reliable. Now the job was over.

He dismissed his secretary; when she had gone William Cenci stood a long time regarding the blurring outline of his desk. He moved quietly to the drawers and began methodically to take his papers from them.

At the bottom of the locked lowest drawer was a pile of letters, thick as William Cenci's slim white wrist.

Those letters on top were communications from Rudyard Kipling. They had been fast friends. William Cenci had collaborated with him in various writings and in short stories.

In the lower part of the pile were the last letters she had written him, dated the summer she died.

William Cenci loved Margaret Douglas for nearly twelve years. Once each month she accompanied him to a theater; again once each month they dined together and went for quiet, rapturous drives. And that was all. She was a very beautiful woman, fond of home, of children. When they were together they seemed so apt a couple that heads would turn to watch them pass. He loved her bitterly and with such fierce constancy that it would have frightened her if she had not been glad for it; if she had not quietly and utterly yearned for him with a love boundless as his own. Many times she wrote shyly to him of her love for a home, for children. He should have married her. It was incredible that he had not, for she was fated to die anyway; but William Cenci whipped his heart to ribbons in the quiet nights in his solitary apartment and never asked her for the word that became a little

paler, a little more shrunken in her heart each dragging, wordless year.

She died and was buried and a part of his life went into her coffin with her and was buried with her, for the man loved only once.

He lived thereafter for his books, the tasks of writing that barely occupied his days. He walked in prouder reticence. He suffered pain and his pale, chiseled features never betrayed a line of it. He had many friends. He was very lonely.

When he rose from the Battery Park bench it was quite dark; his bags were waiting at the station. He rose from the bench for the last time and something within him kissed the sea and the white snow good-by and then flung itself against the sharp embrace of New York City and its high-reaching canyon of lights. He moved deliberately, effacingly, off into the dusk.

In Hollywood he lived three years with the producer, who, when he arrived, insisted on bringing him into his own home. William Cenci, in time, met and was respectfully welcomed by the richest and most talented men and women of the Hollywood world. His new work as a writer startled and puzzled him. He set himself to master it. He lived very quietly. During his third year at the studio he overheard two other writers talking about him.

"If he wasn't the Big Shot's pal and house guest he wouldn't have lasted here two weeks," said one voice.

"He might have been a hot man," the second voice agreed, "back in New York. Here he's in the way."

William Cenci's explanations to the producer were

too courteous to be unconvincing and too gently firm to be withstood: he was going to live by himself and abandon his work at the studio for a time; there was a book he had long wished to translate; it required time and considerable trespass upon the orderly operation of a household.

It was not easy but William Cenci was firm.

"You're not sore about something?" the producer implored.

"You have been a fine friend." Cenci's white face twitched. "I have been most happy here. In a few months perhaps . . ."

They made a pact. After that, each Monday night for two years he came to the producer's house for dinner. It became a ritual.

During the month before the end of the third year the pains had become more overwhelming. In a dingy hovel back in the Hollywood hills where he had been living in utter poverty, his money long gone, William Cenci had wrapped about himself in this alien land the yesterdays that were his books and his etchings and his letters from Margaret Douglas.

The ambulance, summoned by neighbors, discovered him quite unconscious on the floor of the wretched shack, Margaret's last letters scattered like autumn leaves from his fingers, the intact relics of his greatness severely framed upon the walls, in the bookcases, in the white, immaculate, frayed linens about his person.

They brought him to the county hospital Sunday night. Monday was a holiday. A nurse discovered the producer's name among William Cenci's effects early Tuesday morning; she called the producer to let him

know that late Monday evening his friend William Cenci had died.

The telephone on the physician's desk rang again. Dr. Mathis, the doctor in charge of the morgue, had just left the room.

"It's for you," the nurse said, grimacing. "It's the studio again."

"This is Dr. Haskins," the physician said.

"You know who I am?"

"Yes sir," the doctor said respectfully.

"What are you doing down there? What are you stalling me for? What are you up to? This man was my friend, see? The best I've got in the world! We lived together! For three years! I been looking everywhere for him! I never knew he was broke. He never let on. He could be dying and he wouldn't let on! He was a gentleman, see? He was the finest, most brilliant, modest gentleman that ever lived!"

The voice at the other end broke down.

"Yes," said the physician. "Yes sir. I'm sorry. I understand."

"You understand!" the voice at the other end sobbed contemptuously. "What's the matter, then? What the hell's all the red tape about? You think you're going to bury him on county charity? I want a funeral for him at Pierce Brothers! All Hollywood'll be there! Everybody admired, respected, and loved him! I want him given a tribute this town will never forget! A *funeral!*"

"Not at Pierce Brothers," said the physician respectfully. "Not at Pierce Brothers, sir. There's—there's something you don't know." He compressed his lips; he bit the lower lip a moment between his teeth.

"Mr. Cenci," he said at last, "was a Negro, sir. You can tell, sir. After death the body darkens—there's no slightest chance of a mistake. It's too bad, sir. I'm sorry, I can't begin to . . ."

Funeral services were held for William Cenci in a Negro church on Central Avenue, in Los Angeles' black belt. His thin, ascetic form was buried in Belvedere Gardens where the colored folk maintain a small cemetery. There were no mourners.

Chapter VIII

Lightning seldom strikes twice in the same place. It seldom has to.

(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

If column writing has lost distinction and style it is because too many people are writing columns. Every publicity man is a column writer. Columnists grown great employ ghost writers. The ghost writers in turn employ ghost writers. The columnist sits at ease; others gather the trivia and write it for him. My brethren are digging their own graves with idle quills. Their syndicates are selling a name, no longer the name's product. The inevitable is about to stagger in, and when the autopsy is over I will be dangling my heels over the edge of my own whited sepulcher and saying, "I told you so."

I know of one widely read brother who hasn't written his own column in years; hasn't even touched a typewriter. His is an exceptional case; the wonder of it is that the man who writes it for him was an indifferent newspaperman to begin with and has by no means improved anything but his own mediocrity during the years. But many and many another columnist takes many and many a day off while some gem written by an artful publicity man appears under the columnist's by-line. The result is hybrid; however faithfully the ghost haunts the columnist's style, something is

lost. In a short time the style, vigor, ideas, and personality which gained the columnist his prominence are gone. There is no telling how great the sum of American columns might become in quality if this were not the case. It is too bad. It can't come to any good. I wish I was back in the good old days. Everything's changing. Practically.

When I was traveling around the country, writing my column from wherever I happened to be for the night, the states were exactly where they were put. So were the people. When I wrote my column from New York the town stayed about the same. Hollywood is the only town that refuses to stay put. It changes broadly, once every three years. It is not a place, really. It has no formal boundaries. It isn't incorporated as a town. Geographically, politically, and officially it is merely a mailing address. Actually Hollywood is a state of mind.

Nowadays the state of mind is staid. It is full of such alien, complex matters as unions and causes and decorum. Only last week I heard one of my parishioners mention art again. There was a period when Hollywood made its stars overnight; sometimes it took two nights, but they were always made, and in those days a preview was a clambake, in Technicolor, and people went around killing other people on yachts, at least.

There was real gold plumbing in those days, and gold auto bumpers, too, and only two years ago the last ermine toilet-seat cover went reluctantly into a Bundle for Britain. Those were the boom-town days. Golconda. No one will believe a quarter of the things that happened in those mad, lovely times.

And then Hollywood abruptly changed; overnight

the town seethed with home building. Taj Mahals burgeoned beside Alhambras, towering chalets rubbed landscaped jowls with Kiosk, Wat, and early Golgothic. And this, too, passed. Books came in. There was a period when you could find a book on virtually any Hollywood table (and the host under the table), stuck right out there big as life for anybody to read that wanted to. And then . . .

Ah, but so many changes have occurred! The old dear days, when columnists wrote their own columns, and stars were their own best publicity, those days are gathered like last year's girdles. That is the Hollywood you mean when you say Hollywood. When it was an epithet like "Hell," or "Democrat," or "It."

It seems only yesterday that a very lovely screen star gave a surprise party for a very lovely screen star he was soon to marry. They were of the upmost crust; the guests smuggled into her home were the top writers, top actors, top executives of the town. Silently, tiptoeing, they crept into the downstairs living room. A wide staircase was in the center. He went to the foot of the stairs.

"Come down, darling," he called to his fiancée. "I want to see you a minute."

The surprise-party guests, minked and glittering, held decorous breaths.

"Is that you, honey?" the actress shouted from her room upstairs. "Hurry! I been waiting for you!"

"Come on down."

"No! You come up! Wooooo-ooh! Have I got something for *you!*"

The actor ran his finger around his neck inside his full-dress collar.

"Ah, hey!" The guests stared at the floor. "Please! Come on down!"

There was a warm giggle from upstairs.

"I got something you-u-u want!" she chanted.

The embarrassed actor smiled a ghastly smile at the polite, poker-faced guests. Then he started luring again.

"If you come down," he chanted back, "maybe I have a surprise for *you!*"

This pulled the trigger. For a moment there was a silence. Then . . .

"Okay! Here I come!"

And she did. She flew. Hardly touching a step on the way down, she launched herself directly at her anguished fiancé. Her heels met behind him. Her arms flung around his neck.

There was a Moment of Absolute Stillness.

"Happy birthday!" one of the crowd croaked mechanically. The remainder just stared happily.

She hadn't a stitch of clothes on.

Good news spreads fast. The story was all over Hollywood almost before her first wild squeal was over. It's an old story now. That was an epoch. It's all over. It'll never come again.

For a time Charley MacArthur threatened to become a legend by one of the oddest devices even Hollywood had known. He was signed on at his usual fabulous salary to do one of his unusual epics. For a week nothing in particular happened. He did his stint, went home. Abruptly things changed. His typewriter disappeared. A new one replaced it. The second one vanished. Every night a typewriter was missing from his office. The studio set special guards. MacArthur complained feelingly. The typewriters continued to

disappear. Now a typewriter is a gawky thing, heavy, hard to steal, hard to hide, harder to dispose of. The guards were doubled. Finally nine typewriters had vanished. At this point a producer had a bright idea.

"Watch MacArthur!" he ordered.

So they did. The peeking guards watched him pick up his typewriter when he left that night; they watched him stow it under a huge, imported ulster. They watched him walk calmly out of the studio gates with it and get into his car. Instantly they fled to telephones.

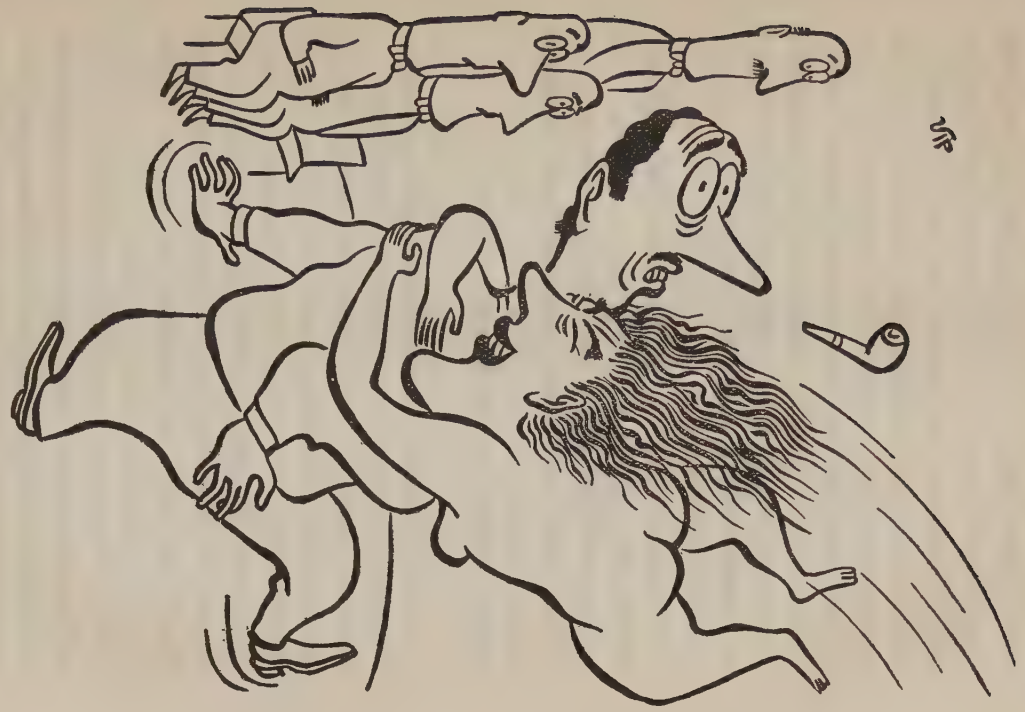
"It's impossible!" screamed the producer. "The man is getting ten thousand dollars a week! Why should he steal typewriters?"

He hung up. He sent an agent and two fellow producers around to MacArthur's house to have a look. They peered through a window. There was MacArthur. The room was crammed with typewriters. Each typewriter had its table, and at each table was a chair. And in the roller of each machine was a sheet of paper. MacArthur was traveling busily from machine to machine. The moment he filled one sheet of paper he moved to the next machine.

It turned out that he simply didn't want to be always taking out a piece of paper and putting in a fresh piece. All of a sudden, it seems, the whole process had struck him as morbid and sensual and disgusting.

From a writer that seemed eminently reasonable. They moved on and let him alone.

One of my favorite actresses came home early one afternoon. Her husband had been playing tennis on the courts back of their manse. The husband and his friend finished their game. They went into the house to take showers. A few moments later the actress un-



locked the front door, home from shopping. She caroled inquiringly; she got no answer. She ran upstairs. At the head of the stairs she caroled again; there was still no response. At this juncture she heard the shower running. She nodded her head knowingly. She dashed into her bathroom. She put her hand through the shower curtain. She grabbed.

"Dingdong, darling!" she caroled. "Supper's ready!"

There was a muffled sound that rose above the shower noise behind the curtain. She smiled, looked at herself in the mirror, walked out of the room, and started downstairs.

Halfway down the stairs she met her husband, coming up.

She stared at him one awful, stricken moment.

"Oh, Lord! Lord God!" she cried, and fled the house.

She wouldn't come home for two days.

The days worsen. Change is not always progress. What has become of those days? What has become of that one golden day when the wife of one of the world's leading conductors drew an angry bead with a .22 rifle and shot the world's most famous star right in the behind, happily furrowing only her left or off-camera buttock? Maybe Hollywood is becoming a ghost town; maybe my brethren are wise to employ ghosts to write of it.

Only, there are so many Hollywoods; there is a side to Hollywood that is all old bungalows, and quiet side streets, and placid, knitting folk who have never been near a studio; folk who get the paper from back home and write delighted letters full of oranges and sunsets and palm trees and climate and cheap groceries. Folk

who never see a studio. Folk from other states, the Midwest, mostly, come to retire and spend their aging days in sunlight. And here is an amazing thing: almost three fourths of Hollywood's population is composed of these folk. They have their stories too; sometimes they make a column. There was, for instance, Mrs. Cary Clarke and the beech tree. An extra used to know her.

Edward Clarke and his wife Cary came to Hollywood from New Hampshire. They had sold the farm on which they had lived all their lives; they had a few thousand dollars, and they had always dreamed of spending their last years in pleasant sunshine away from the harsh winters and the reminding, stony fields of New Hampshire. She was a pleasant, small woman, decently gray, New England quiet, and he was cut from the same piece. They kept to themselves in a small bungalow they rented on a side street and they were almost like bride and groom in the things they shared and discovered together.

He could never cease marveling at the lusty California soil; daily he would take a chunk from the corner of the tiny lawn and bring it to the porch where she sat rocking.

"Look!" he would say huskily. She was very nearsighted: she would lean far out and squint her eyes to see. The soil would trickle between his gnarled, farmer's hands. He would look up then.

"Grow elephants!" he would confide. They would smile their imperceptible smiles at each other.

The palm trees were unceasing wonder to them. Even the grass was different. It was a wonderland, all alien, and the people were so strangely dressed they did not think of them at all.

It was about the beginning of their second year in Hollywood, in this different Hollywood which is a bungalow on a side street, that the hills of New Hampshire began to call to Mrs. Clarke with the sad insistence of autumn twilight. She fought it off at first; but the day came—perhaps there was a chill in the air just like the East, and on that day she could not hide her longing from him any longer.

"It's so wonderful here," she said softly. Her old eyes were wet suddenly. "I do love it."

He stroked her thin hand silently.

"We can't rightly go back," he said.

"I know!" she said. "And your rheumatiz is heaps better. Only . . ." She burst out suddenly, passionately: "If we only had a beech tree! Jest one leetle beech! Suthin' I could look at all day long 'stead of these crazy palms. Suthin' to mind me of where we was children. Of home . . ."

It was as long a speech as Cary Clarke had ever made. Two days later Edward had sold his father's gold watch and fob and had taken a sum—a small sum, but perilous—from the tiny amount that must last them the few remaining years of their lives. Thoughtfully he trickled another handful of soil between his wise fingers. Then he went forth to look for a beech tree.

It came; he attended to the planting of it himself. It was a beautiful beech tree; folk driving past used to stop their cars just to look at it. Straight and slim it reared between two towering palms. But it was expensive. Edward gave up smoking. He declared his throat hurt him, and anyway the tobacco wasn't the same. The tree was New Hampshire. Cary smiled again. They spent hours puttering about it. Sometimes she saw it through a happy mist of tears. Day upon

day she would rock on the porch, her nearsighted eyes peering half closed at it. Edward was happy. He didn't have to give up smoking for long. He died in bed barely two months after the tree was planted.

Funeral expenses were an incongruous something they had not reckoned on. When it was over, when what was done that had to be done, and, for the sake of loved Edward, fittingly, Cary had less than a thousand dollars remaining. She made the money last two entire years. There was no loneliness like her bleak loneliness; there were no friends, not even a neighbor. The tree was her only companion; she touched the bark; Edward's hand had been there; she touched a limb; it had waved in the wind of New England. She peered at it lovingly. It was all she knew of the world.

A young extra girl wandered in, one day, and asked her if she rented rooms. And that was lucky: there was no food left. Even so, the day came when Cary told the girl she would have to be giving up the house.

"No!" said the girl. "How about your tree?"

"My tree?" Cary echoed dully.

"Sell it!" the girl cried joyfully. "People here will give loads for a tree like that!"

But Cary could not sell it; in the end it was the girl who had to sell it for her. Cary waited inside, the blinds drawn. The first nurseryman came and looked at the beautiful beech and talked to the girl a long time; then he went away. Another man came. The girl looked oddly at Cary that night; she cried and hugged the dazed old lady to her young breast.

For weeks Cary couldn't bear to look at the raw mound of earth where the tree had stood; her eyes longed for the sight of it, her hands yearned for the feel of its bark, her heart groped for its memory. It

was bound up with Edward and home and New Hampshire and Edward and the sound the wind made in its branches and a young boy, a young girl; and Edward. It was gone; plucked out; quite gone.

After that she moved about her days dully. The money for the tree did not last forever; soon it was gone too. Those were earlier days; there was no guild then. One day the young girl took the old lady, unresisting, to a studio, and maneuvered her on a set as an extra. And then, a week or so later, onto another set; and then, one day, another.

On this set, whiter, slimmer, prouder than ever, was the beech tree. The studio had bought it. Straight through the outlandish mob Cary Clarke moved blindly and defiantly until at length she was sitting on the prop grass blissfully beneath her tree. Those were better, greener days. At that moment a young assistant director saw her and nudged the great Von Stroheim. There was an expression on her face: it was breathtaking. Von Stroheim blinked, made up his mind, strode toward her.

They gave the bewildered little body a six months' contract; not for a lot, of course; but enough to last a Cary Clarke the rest of her days. Whatever it was they saw, they never recaptured it; she was no actress, no find; it was just the tree. In a week they forgot her, all but the pay-roll department.

That is the story as the extra girl told it to me. Cary bought back her tree of course. She had it until she died. She was content. She never knew that Edward had bought it from the studio in the first place; she never noticed with her nearsighted old eyes that it didn't quite grow. Prop trees don't grow. But they look very real. Nowadays they even use real grass.

Chapter IX

A watched pot never boils over. Someday I will get the hell away from all this and go to a desert island.
(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

Stuff about gold kills me. I get all excited. Someday I will find a gold mine with a billion gold dollars in it.

In Nevada there is a ghost town named Searchlight.

I know a fellow there by the name of John Mendenhall. He lives all alone on the outskirts of Searchlight in a small shack over a mine. He didn't go there to buy a mine, but in Searchlight you can't buy land that hasn't an abandoned mine on, in, or under it. The mine that Mendenhall bought was a tangle of old, rusty spur, thick, weathered timbers, and even a dangerous, dangling elevator hoist. It ran deep into the earth. Ten years before a trio of highbinders had come that way, bought the mine, spent seven thousand dollars fixing it up, then put in a dummy cyanide wash, a few new timbers, new chain, paint, and other furbishing. Then they bought fifteen thousand dollars' worth of gold in San Francisco, nuggets and high-grade ore samples. They salted the mine—for you Eastern chums that means they scattered nuggets and gold samples over the mine so that anyone who tested the property would find it rich. Then they returned to San Francisco to sell stock in what they pretended

was a new gold strike in an overlooked vein. They sold quite some stock. Their fraud was discovered. They were sent to prison. The lizards and the sagebrush and the sun and the sand took over the abandoned diggings. Then Mendenhall wandered in from faraway Oregon. Someone had sent him to Searchlight. He looked over the ghost town. He bought this particular mine. Bought it for the shack on top of it. Bought it for a song. Mendenhall lay in the healing desert sun, read, puttered, grew bored. A month went by and then out of boredom the city man took a pick and ventured to the bottom of the mine. He dug down just eighteen inches. The exercise was good for him. He hauled out the dirt and rubble. He went back down again. He looked at where he had dug. At one side a wide ribbon of dull yellow gold zigzagged across the middle. He had found a lost vein.

Instead of spending seven and a half thousand dollars sweating out the construction of the massive flat block of concrete, which, with a few dummy pipes stuck in one end, made what looked like a cyanide wash, instead of going to San Francisco to buy gold and coming back to carefully salt the long-abandoned mine, all those highbinders would have had to do was dig down eighteen inches farther and they would have had an actual, legitimate gold strike.

That's what I would have done. I'm positive of it.

That Mendenhall was lucky. He found something else. If the original owners of the mine, back in the eighties, when they had abandoned it, had only looked behind the shack over the pit, they would have found a perfect fault. It was lying right on the very top of the ground.

He showed it to me. I couldn't see any fault. The

ground looked just like any other ground. Then he pointed to where it was sort of humped and cracked-looking. It still looked like ordinary desert ground. So then he went into the shack and got an iron ring a little bigger than a doughnut and a little thicker, and with a hole in the middle. And he brought out a hammer. He told me to pick up some of the dirt and rock from the humped, cracked-looking line. I did. Then he told me to put my handful of drab stuff in the hole in the ring and take the hammer and beat it until it was powder. I did. Then he told me to put the powdered rock and dirt into a pan; when I had done this he poured water into the pan and made me swash it around.

In a few seconds he stopped me. He told me to put my forefinger in the pan and push away the top layer of wet earth. At the bottom of the pan was yellow gold dust. A half a dollar's worth. Standing right there looking at me. I'll never get over it.

That fault lay right on the surface of the ground. It was about thirty yards long and at least eighteen inches wide. He didn't know how deep it went. He didn't really care. He was a funny fellow. When he wanted money for the simple needs of desert living—a new stove, maybe, or clothes, or maybe his car had worn out, or the tires, or whatever—he would simply go down into the mine and dig a little while, and come up with enough gold to buy whatever he needed or wanted. And that was that.

None of us, I guess, does much more, now that I come to think of it. I remember a Florida chap, a W. H. Lutz, who was in love with a star. For lay purposes you could call it a star; actually it is a swirling, vaporous streaming of many stars, cased in gaseous nebulae thousands of miles long.

Lutz is no back-yard astronomer. He's internationally famous. He invented a method for manufacturing telescopic mirrors out of metal.

His love for the star absorbed him utterly. Night after night he would swing his huge telescope into the limitless heavens, and hour upon hour he would stare at her.

It is a her; he showed me pictures of her, and she looks precisely like a woman, arms outstretched, breasts bared, trailing robe flowing about a human woman's form. You need no imagination to determine what she looks like, or whether her form is human. She is part of the constellation of Cygnus. If you have a telescope she is directly overhead, her arms yearning to the dazzle of the Northern Cross, about whose cold, blinding effulgence she has fluttered, mothlike, for sixty billion years. Her name is NGC-6960.

Cold scientist in the daytime, this small, earnest man, housed in a little wet dirt on spinning Earth, has kept a constant tryst with her, a hundred million miles away, almost all his life.

Persons such as Professor Lutz are symbols of the hundreds who are the fabric of the life a columnist lives on paper. They "lend" themselves. Their stories may be spun to infinity. They are like Roz Russell getting into her car in the middle of the night and driving to an interstate highway and selecting a passing car and following it, wherever it goes. They are like Lionel Barrymore making etchings. Like Paul de Kruif's obstetrician, who, retiring from a profitable career, devoted the remainder of his life to studying the obstetrics of whales, trying to figure out how the mother whale cut her child's umbilical cord.

But the life a columnist leads inside himself cannot,

somehow, be made into columns. There is too much mood and impression in his living and not enough twist. He has no denouements, a Garrick without curtain lines, a penitent without a deathbed confession.

Long ago I gave up trying to write a hunting column. My friend K.C.B. cannot bear the thought of killing anything, and it makes him confusedly angry that other people can; he thinks it a weak spot in my character that I get actual pleasure out of hunting. The late W. O. McGeehan, the Addisonian sports essayist, had a similar repression in regard to slaying moose; until, one day, confronted by a moose, he suddenly thought that it resembled F.P.A., the columnist. He let the moose have it in the heart, and sent the head to the Friars Club on West Forty-seventh Street, New York.

Perhaps K.C.B. is right. But, like so many other things I do and which I know are wrong, I get such tremendous pleasure out of hunting that I cannot even write a column adequately summing up my ecstasy.

I used to hunt in and around Comptche. This Comptche is a name vaguely covering a post office-general store, a few dozen houses, and a vague stretch of high hogbacks and limitless redwood forest. It lies between Ukiah and Fort Bragg, about two hundred and seventy miles above San Francisco. It is a country so wild that when I emerged from my annual three weeks' hunt the world was utterly new to me. After such a forest burial I have stopped the car to feel a concrete lamppost, and I have gotten down on all fours in a hotel room to run my hands over the amazing carpet.

I hate to walk, except in New York and New Orleans. But, loosed in this wilderness, I have cheer-

fully covered twenty miles in a day, intent every moment on the next ridge, blind to everything but what might lie around the next bend.

I try to explain to Ken Beaton that I have no thought of hurting a deer, a wild pig, a quail, or whatever other quarry. . . . I haven't the slightest impulse of red murder toward them. But I have thousands of years of hunting instinct, and I am an excellent shot, and I have never found food to equal that which my gun brings down, nor passion so absorbing to all my senses as the prospects, the stalking, the gamble, and the hunt. All my senses are sharpened, my eyes see farther, reject less, my ears are infinitely keener, my taste wilier, my feeling more acute. I'm hot stuff.

Up in Comptche the woods closed in and buried me from the world. I made my yearly base at the home of a Mrs. Charlotte Layton. She was a widow, a former schoolteacher, and she had come to the mountainous area from Seattle because her small daughter's lungs were delicate. Year after year I returned to the place until one year the little girl in pigtails was missing.

She had run off with a fellow from far down the ridge. His was the nearest abode; you could barely call it a house. The next nearest was owned by Finns, some eighteen miles away. Mrs. Layton and her handy man, Vic, and her small boy had built their own house by felling redwoods, riving the logs, then splitting the quartered wood into boards. Nails were scarce as emeralds. Many of the boards were pegged.

The Laytons raised potatoes. They bought a cow. Board by board, they built a barn. They picked berries. They fenced forty steep acres. All of this by hand, every board, every stick, every stone. And when they had done this, and accumulated eight more cows

and a pigpen, then the common enemy of that region, a forest fire, wiped them out overnight and left them charcoal and bare mountainside.

Here is what a forest fire is like. Here is Mrs. Layton's story:

"It was September, in 1931. I had six cows giving milk; three more that should be milking, and four nice heifers. We had just bought a new separator. My barn was filled with hay. I had a hog fattened for slaughter and a flock of hens and plenty of wheat to feed them. Also a ton of potatoes dug and sacked.

"On my storeroom shelves were three hundred quarts of canned fruit, vegetables, meats, and jellies. Ironically, we were well provided with firewood. The yard about my house had been sown to pretty red clover. The weather was still too dry. A few drizzling mornings and foggy nights were hopeful of rain. The tiny farm had never seemed so complete, so attractive. We felt snugly repaid for all the endless disappointments, the harsh driving work from sunup to sundown for nearly six years which had accomplished all this.

"The sun rose on the morning of September 22, 1931; it was warm, dewy, and fresh. The two children were at school. My oldest daughter happened to be visiting me. I left her at the house. I went in my car to the post office. Victor went with me, and his brother Leo. While we were waiting at the post office somebody noticed smoke on the horizon. A neighbor judged the fire was in the direction of 'Nigger Nat's Opening,' a few miles away. We joked about it. Two years before, after a small fire far below my place, the men who fought it came to the house for a hot meal. They had liked it. So now they kidded about getting another meal.

"Leo and I started for home at about 11:30 A.M.,

and when we got there I made us lunch. While eating, first one and then another of us would go out to look at the smoke, which was moving toward the east. It was growing heavier. We walked to a ridge. Here we heard the roar; we could see the flames. It was on the South Fork. It had jumped. It was now rapidly nearing us. Instantly we turned back to the house. It was then about 2:20 P.M. I rushed Leo and my daughter to the school to get the children.

"Victor brought the cattle up from the pasture and put them in the barn. Far below, virtually everyone was out fighting an outbreak of the fire near Navarro, a hamlet fifteen miles away. Twenty-five minutes later, walking nervously about my house, I could plainly hear the roar. *Five minutes later the fire was in my east field, in the stubble,* and Victor and I were running here and there trying to put it out.

"The fire changed direction. Suddenly I realized that somewhere on the mountain Mrs. Vorheis and her baby and Mr. and Mrs. Harper would depend upon me for rescue. They had no car.

"I said, 'Victor, please turn the stock loose.'

"'Oh no, no!' he protested. 'I will stay with my poor cows, and perhaps I can save them.'

"But I could not drive a car. There were human lives dependent upon us. It was time to abandon ship or perish. My own children, at the schoolhouse, were directly in the path of the flames.

"Victor turned out the stock. He rushed about, breaking down fences, so that the trapped animals could escape. Smoke began to curl from the barn. In the rear our house already was burning.

"Victor and I started for our ramshackle car.

"The fire was running up the hill. Ahead of it came

a small herd of deer led by a most magnificent buck. He was absolutely indifferent to us. We jumped into the car and drove through the lower gate. Fires were starting everywhere along the rutted road. We did not stop for gates. We crashed right through them. Racing between fires on both sides of the road, our car's capacity taxed to the limit with frightened neighbors we had picked up all along the way, Vic drove as I never expect to be driven again, down the steep corduroy dirt grade in wild headlong flight. It was a one-car path. On our left was a sheer drop to the valley far below. Fast as we went, my anxieties flew faster. I was numb. My children! Had Leo and my daughter beat the fire?

"The sight of them, safe, screaming, 'Mother! Mother! Mother!' as we banged and bounced precipitously down the last steep descent seemed like a miracle. We had come many miles. We were at a ranch farm owned by Vic's father.

"We had reached a smoking and scorched haven as yet untouched by actual flames; a few acres unburnt in the midst of a thundering holocaust which was enveloping the universe. For an instant we were safe on those few acres, although we were cut off from any chance of escape by blinding sheets of flame that towered sixty and seventy feet high.

"Suddenly our haven became a trap. The barn burst into flame. A cabin next to the house was on fire. The fences were blazing. An eighty-mile gale began to blow.

"A few hundred feet from the house was a small outbuilding housing several hundred gallons of gasoline. We made our stand at the house. We had to fight flying burning brands from trees. We had to keep

fighting fire on the house. As we fought the other cabins and outbuildings and our precious cars were entirely consumed.

"Vic and Leo climbed to the roof. Water was terribly scarce. Mrs. Vorheis and my oldest daughter threw wet clothes, curtains, and bedquilts up to them. The rest of us flew to fires that magically leaped up out of nowhere around the house.

"The heat became horrible. Inside it was so hot that clothing in the closets began to burn. In the rough cellar below, a pasteboard box of onions began to blaze. Someone dumped out the onions and threw the box down the hill.

"Suddenly, at six o'clock, our danger appeared to abate. There was a breathing spell. An hour later we felt the worst was over. We took stock of ourselves. All of us were burnt in painful areas, the skin dangling in loose shreds. We could hardly see. Our eyes were red torments in their sockets.

"About seven o'clock Victor went up the hill on a cautious foray to inspect the extent of the destruction. He shambled back a long time later, head bowed, shoulders sagging, his feet dragging heavily through the smoking black ruin.

"On the trail to my place he had found my twelve head of milk cows, flame-seared and dead; a few blackened lumps of feathers told the fate of the chickens. Our four neighbors' homes and animals were similarly wiped out. Everything was gone. Everything.

"We learned later that determined and desperate and entirely futile attempts had been made from time to time by volunteers to break through to us. They were nearly roasted alive in their efforts. The wires were down. The roads were blocked by fallen trees

and burning bridges. The countryside was devastated. Most of the fire fighters were unable to get to the very districts where they were most needed. There was much generous heroism abroad that day and night on the part of men who, having lost all, sick, painfully burned, desperately tired, fought on indomitably to save the pitifully poor belongings of their neighbors.

"I met Pete Ciro, a friend who lived a few miles away. He was burned out too, of course. He said to me: 'Don't care about anything now, I am so happy; my family is safe. Pete Camolli and me was in Ukiah, hauling grapes with my truck, when I was called by telephone to get to Comptche at once because there was a big fire and my home was in danger. My truck crawled. We kept having to stop for fallen trees. We jumped out of the truck. We started running. The nearer we got to Comptche the more we knew how fierce the fire had been, and the weaker I grew. I knew my family had been roasted alive. We came around the bend in the road. I saw there was nothing left of my place. My God! How I ran and how I cried, and when I got near the bridge it was gone and I could smell something like human flesh, and I fell down and cried: "My! Oh my! Pete! The family are gone!" But Pete ran to the ruins and he said, "No, Ciro, it's tires!"

"'Then we got courage and went further this time and again I was sure they were burning. But it was grain seed.

"'After we ran some more we met a neighbor fighting the fire and he told me my family was safe at another neighbor's. I was not satisfied, though, even after reaching this neighbor's and finding my wife and Pete's wife, and I had my wife show me the children,

who were asleep, and then they were all counted but Pete's father and I said: "Where's the old man?" And just then he stepped into the room, and by this time I was so all in I threw my arms around him and we just stood there bawling.'

"The fire kept on burning for days. Three days after it started a fog rolled in. This gradually helped matters.

"It comes back to me as almost like a dream that when the fire had passed we stood, Mr. and Mrs. Del Grasso and I, in a weariness that was nearly apathy.

"The others had moved out of sight. Suddenly, very quietly, a small outbuilding that had escaped all injury now began to burn. Mr. Del Grasso nodded toward it. He said, without stirring and dreamily: 'We could save that, Maria.' And she said, just as quietly and also without moving: 'Yes, we could save it.' And I also assented, and we all three stood dully and watched it burn until it was completely destroyed. And when I think back to that moment I wonder if, after all our frantic work in saving the house, it had been at that moment the house itself that had begun to blaze—should we have stood so and watched it burn? Yes, almost I believe we should. We had reached the furthermost limits of our fatigue. Almost—I believe we should!"

That was four years ago. She went to a lumber company that owns most of the land up in those hills, and they lent her one hundred dollars. They had it all to do over again, the labor of six heartbreaking years plundered in some six hours.

They did well. The soil is rocky, the region poor. Yet when I last saw it the house was larger, better than pictures of the earlier one. There were three barns

instead of two. There were four pigs in the pen and twenty cows and a small electric-light plant from Sears, Roebuck.

I will never forget the terror of an event that happened on my third yearly hunting trip up there. I had made camp five miles from the Layton house. It was early morning, I had come back from dawn hunting, and I was making a cook fire. I don't know how a flame managed to leap the large circle I had cleared around the fire. But an instant later a bush was burning. I flung water at it. Part of the flame died. A new one started two bushes away. The giant redwoods in that thick forest were dry; there was a tree at every elbow. I scrabbled in the dirt, digging frantically with my bare hands, flinging the dirt, flinging water. The second bush fired a third. I threw blankets at it, pans, everything. I moved faster than I can write. The flames leaped higher. They spread back. I ripped off my coat, flung it in the center of the blaze, stomped, beat at the flames with my bare hands, rolled in the burning bushes. Twenty yards away a new blaze started.

I could think of nothing but the Laytons and how they had once before been burned out, and this crazy, growing holocaust that was going to destroy them again. I went absolutely crazy. I ran through the blazing, towering bushes, trying to hug the flames, put them out against my body. One of the trees started to catch. A strong morning wind was blowing. The fire was now a semicircle, twenty yards wide, thirty yards deep. It was utterly past control. It was spreading like a sea. I stood there, helpless, crazy, numbed, watching it. And then, abruptly, it stopped. It died out. I don't know why. Vic told me it had happened to him. There was a spread area of blackened ground and a few small

flames still leaping. I rushed to put them out. Then it was over.

I did no more hunting that day.

That afternoon I trudged up to the Laytons' and told them about it. Vic said once he had started a campfire in a dry river bottom. Nothing but sand and rocks for many yards around the fire. And yet somehow a tiny flame leaped and made its way, and minutes later, hearing a noise, he looked behind him and saw the blaze racing like a comet. It burned a half mile of timber. It too stopped mysteriously as it started.

There is no terror, not even death itself, to match that terror and that helplessness. I am not at all afraid of fire; when I was a reporter I remember following blithely hard on the heels of five men clambering a blazing slope. They were overtaken by the flames and died in frozen attitudes as they fell, crisped and blackened like human marshmallows. I remember watching them fall; running to safety, my shoes were burned through and my clothing was smoking heartily, but I felt no particular fear. However horrible, a brush fire, a flaming building, is not so sickeningly terrible as a forest fire.

Next day I moved camp. That was the year I got my five-point buck. It was just at evening. I had been scrambling up and down hills all day. I was hungry. I didn't dare smoke. I sat down on a fallen redwood log. The forest was incredibly odorous with resin and hot earth and the moist smell of green bushes. I ate a mouthful of berries. I had the most beautiful gun in the world, a .45-90, heavy, balanced, lever action, ivory sight, checked stock, cheek, walnut and octagonal black iron, long and gunny and appreciative as a dog. I sat there fondling it. I looked up.

Less than two hundred yards away was a buck's head. He was between two huge trees. He was down wind, down the side of a clear slope, halfway up the slope beyond. I stood up, inch by inch. My heart was battering. I held my breath. The gun seemed to have an instinct of its own in such matters. I reached for it to raise it and found it already against my shoulder, my cheek pressed against the stock. The buck twitched its head. He was brown in the rear sight. The gun bucked. Next instant I was pelting down the slope, up the next slope, flying. He lay where he had stood, a magnificent five-pointer, drilled in the head, instantly killed.

I got him around my shoulders—you tie a left forefoot to a right rear and a right forefoot to a left rear and it makes a sort of sling—and somehow got him back to camp.

I would take ten carefully counted steps. Then I would lean against a redwood and rest. Then ten more steps. Then another rest. Over and over again. Up steep, crumbling hillside. Then along hogback. Then downhill. Then up again. When I got to camp it was past midnight.

Next day Vic killed a hog. We let it cool overnight. Then all hands turned to and stripped the hog and the deer of all meat. Then Mrs. Layton mixed the meat and added spices. Vic went to the barn and brought back casings. We made sausages. I took back forty pounds when I returned to civilization. There never were sausages like those sausages. Half fresh hog, half deer. I lived on the memory of the hunt and the taste of the venison sausage for an entire year.

I went back by way of Ukiah. The man in the Ukiah hardware store was fidgeting with news. Party

of hunters had just come in, bringing one of their number with a bashed-in head.

And the only hunting incident I can remember was this.

There were five in the party. They had cruised the country trying in vain for some unposted place to hunt. Finally they drove up to a farmhouse. One of the men, a Joe Somebody, went in to talk to the farmer.

The farmer said okay.

"Just shut the fences behind you, where you go. Don't leave 'em open. And watch your fires. Be careful, that's all."

"Thanks," said Joe feelingly.

"That's all right. Hope you get a deer. Used to like to hunt myself. And say—while you're at it, you can do me a favor. When you come to the third pasture you'll see an old white horse in it. Poor old devil's got the bots. He's dropping from old age. Been meaning to knock him in the head. I'll take it as a favor if you'll shoot him for me."

"You bet," said Joe.

He went back to the car.

"It's okay, fellows!" he shouted.

Then an idea hit him. Cunningly he began to stare from side to side, not moving his head.

"What's eating you, Joe?" one of the party asked suddenly.

Joe winked knowingly. He began to chew a finger. The others looked wonderingly at each other. They drove through the second pasture. Once again Joe leaped out, without a word took down the bars, waited until the car passed through, put them up again, leaped back into the car. The other boys in the party stared at each other, troubled.

VIP

When they approached the third pasture Joe began an imbecile grin and loaded his gun ostentatiously. This time, after he let down the bars and the car had moved through, he pretended to be electrified by something he saw in a far corner of the pasture. Following his eyes, they saw an old white horse.

While they were looking, Joe had taken his gun. He had begun to stalk the horse. Crawling, ducking behind bushes, he tiptoed within ten yards of the unconcerned, grazing animal. Back at the car the other four hunters had dismounted hurriedly. They watched, horrified. Joe stalked within five yards of the horse. Then he raised his gun. He took deliberate aim at the horse's head. The four other guys shouted. They began to run toward him. The gun roared. The horse fell heavily. Joe beat his chest. He turned and swaggered back toward the oncoming group. He grinned at their horror-stricken faces.

"Always wanted to kill a horse," he said mildly. He bent his head, turned from them, and peered into the muzzle of his rifle. He grinned his idiotic grin.

"Someday," he said absently, "I'm gonna kill me a man."

He picked up his gun. Simultaneously four gun butts hit him.

The man in the hardware store clucked indignantly. He said the Joe Somebody was in the Ukiah hospital. He said the minute he came to he started laughing. Said he'd been laughing ever since. Said the other fellows were so sore they were all for busting his head again. He shook his head.

"City fellers!" he said. "Damnedest thing I ever heard of!"

Me too.

Chapter X

The only hard and fast rule is that what you're doing is a gamble; you got to gamble whether you want to or not. Only God knows how high up the gambling law reaches. When I consider the sleeping dogs better left lying, the sparrows watched fall, the green bay tree, the narrowness of the way and the uncertainty of the Reward, I am often tempted to consider who will be judged and who the judge; I do not know what kind of game is played in heaven but if I were Gabriel I should bid no trump.

(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

There was a time when my brother Lewis made me almost as many columns as the Democrats, and those were the days when the Democrats had just come into money. One of the first things they did in southern California about the time the money got to aching them was to build a tremendous dairy up around the outskirts of Los Angeles. It took a long, expensive time building; when it was finished the government filled it with the shiniest, most scientific, most persuasive milking equipment that ever emptied an udder. And there the building and the equipment stood, ready to milk, and nothing to milk on. It stood like that for a couple of months.

All the oil drillers and miners in those parts went around snickering, and for a while it looked like the Democrats had done it again and here was another Administration error. In the nick of time the government redeemed itself. When the sneering and snickering was loudest they sent in a string of cattle cars and, by God, they stocked that dairy with two thousand head of the finest steers money could buy.

I tell you, that silenced the critics. They stood there gaping at those beautiful steers and then gawking at that noble milking equipment and then back at the steers again, and then those rough and bearded miners and oil drillers just took off their hats reverently and walked on out, hushed and respectful and petrified. It was revolutionary. They were like men who had just seen the first train come puffing across the prairie, or the first steamboat. Nobody in those parts ever had thought of milking steers.

But in those days the government was always thinking up things like that and revolutionizing progress and for a good while things were pretty lively everywhere. Men bustled around prescribing orange juice for rickety children around San Francisco, but they weren't working any harder or more scientific than government men down South destroying as many as a thousand tons of surplus oranges a day.

Factories were working overtime turning out plows and guns, the plows to provide more crops and the guns to shoot the horses so they couldn't pull them, on account of there being too many crops already.

For a while this got a little confusing, mostly to the government, but before any harm could come of the confusion they stepped right into the breach and passed a law that anybody that plowed invited a fine, and to keep things all square and Democratic and equal they made it clear next day that anybody that didn't plow had better look out too, because this time it was the government they were monkeying with.

Anybody that didn't understand it could go on relief. This paid better wages than field workers got, so naturally there was nothing to do, hardly, but ship almost all the Mexicans out of the state and pay their way back to Mexico where they came from.

These Mexicans were pretty dumb. They worked all year and didn't make much and some of them didn't even know the government had taken California away from Mexico almost a hundred years ago. The American Legion and the Chambers of Commerce were pretty well disgusted with their lack of patriotism and not even knowing the history of our Republic and paying taxes and not knowing what for. They were glad to see them go because now it would give a white man a chance, and everybody praised the government, although some said it would have been better to ride them out of California on a rail than waste the Democracy's money paying their fare.

The more people thought about it the more indignant they got, and they would lean on their shovels in WPA projects and talk about it by the hour. One night feeling ran so high in one little agricultural town near Los Angeles that they were going to get all the Mexican books they could lay hands on and burn them right in the middle of the main street, but they couldn't find any Mexican books and they were pretty sore, and there is no knowing what they might have done except the next day the Governor of the state of Colorado sent a gunboat down the river to fire on the state of New Mexico for stealing Boulder Dam power and that got people's minds off things, and anyway that week the relief pay checks were all late.

Those were fast-moving, progressive times: news popping everywhere and columnists richer with material and busier than bluebottles in a slaughterhouse. Someday somebody ought to write a book about those times. Quick as one thing would die down another would take its place. That was how it was. Only two weeks after the last Mexican had been bundled below the border and the government had just put the final

polish on a magnificent new bridge over a non-existent river that might come along someday and there would be the bridge and it would wander gratefully under it, the farmers began to holler for harvest help. The louder they hollered the more everybody sympathized and the more nobody came. The crops started to rot in the fields. The farmers appealed to the patriotism of men on relief, asked them to quit drawing checks for doing nothing and go out in the fields and earn some. The reliefers pointed out reasonably that the best way to put the country on its feet was to earn money; they showed how they were making more on relief than they could in the fields and were consequently more patriotic to stay on relief where they could do the country the most good by earning the most money.

Farmers, believed to have been of foreign stock originally, got mad and sent in unpatriotic letters to Washington, demanding men be taken off relief and made to take offered jobs. Washington officials, also believed to have been of foreign stock, principally Russian, asked relief bureaus for a checkup. The relief bureaus interviewed the reliefers, who indignantly stood on their rights as American citizens, refused to work in the fields, said it wasn't white man's work and fit only for Mexicans. The relief bureaus turned around and looked for Mexicans. They could find hardly any; somehow those oily, eely loafers had fandangled Washington into passing some law ordering themselves deported. All the relief bureaus could find were tidy gardens and empty homes abandoned when the Mexicans sneaked out.

After that, of course, feeling ran high. There was some talk of corralling what Mexicans were left and

tarring and feathering them and riding them on a rail the hell out of the country, just to show them what they thought of them for their fellow Mexicans stealing off like that and deserting America just when she needed them most. When they thought of how America had let them build small shacks and even raise little gardens and let them work wherever they could find it and pay taxes and in all respects treated them just as fair and square and white as though they hadn't tried to resist when decent American citizens took the state away from them, why, some of our boys got almost mad enough to vote, or go off relief, or find their wives a day's work.

It got worse when the relief bureaus cut them off and made them work the harvest, but about that time the government sent three fine new silos down to the coast oil fields and everybody got interested in seeing how silos would work in an oil field and forgot their other troubles, and anyway by that time most of the harvest had rotted and the farmers had gotten sensible and gone on relief too.

Those were brimming days; and yet in those days Lewis was competition even for the Democrats. He is twenty years old now, and people call him Lewis. But for six years, from the time he was ten, he was Lewie the Horse. I named him that in the column, and that was how people knew of him and how many know of him to this day. There wasn't anything else to call him. He lived among horses, ate with them, and dreamed their dreams. He smelled of them. He slept beneath them, on top of them, and slaunchwise. He talked to them.

That was Lewie the Horse's secret. He talked to horses. And, by God, they talked back.

It began the year we shipped him off to a small private school near San Diego. It was in the backwoods, the most admirable private school; every boy had a rifle and every boy had a horse. They ran about wearing nothing but shorts. Their marks were amazingly high. If they didn't study they were kept in. It is an awful thing to be kept in. To be kept in—barefoot—while the rest of the boys were out hysterically squilching dust between their toes, chasing quail, doctoring horses, or just playing squat tag in a cactus patch, was a penalty so horrid and loathsome and against nature that at the end of each year every kid was valedictorian.

Now Lewie's father was a notable horseman. Dad once had five hotels in New York City, and he was always fretting about in one or the other, but he never missed a day at Durland's or the Central Park bridle path. Early in the mornings he would find the most unmanageable horse in New York State and get on and leave the world of cares behind him. Once or twice I went with him. He always forgot I was along. He would ride onto the bridle strip and, once there, his horse invariably seemed to know what was expected of him and would go nuts. At this juncture Dad would relax and start talking to himself.

"*Ho!*" he would holler. "What do you think *you're* doing? *Ho! C'mere!* Gonna fire that son of a bitch Howard if it's the last thing on earth I ever—*ho!* What do you think *you're* doing?"

This would go on for hours. I think he got a sort of release that way. Dad never discussed his problems with anyone but a horse, a wild, lively horse; and he probably reasoned that if the horse was lively enough he wouldn't remember what Dad had been saying

and use it against him. He was a magnificent horseman. No horse ever threw him and all of them were maniacs and he balanced all his books on them.

I think it was from Dad that Lewie got sib to horses. The school's horses were purchased from a near-by Indian tribe. They cost twenty-five dollars apiece. The Indians were indifferent to what horse the school picked; they just took the twenty-five dollars and waved vaguely at the range. These Indian ponies roamed unbroken. Lewie got his own horse simply by going out on the range with a rope and pattering barefoot after the one he wanted, and nobody knows how he did it, but late that night he rode jauntily into the school corral, bareback, guiding the horse with the rope. I was familiar, at the end of his first year at the school, with his uncanny ability with horses. Every time I visited him he put on an exhibition for me. When he was eleven he rode a horse over a four-foot jump, bareback, standing erect. He was always in the corral. His ambition at that time was one day to have a colt. Not to buy one; to *have* one, personally.

And then one day, when he was twelve, I was down at Caliente for the races. I bumped into Lewie. The school had been given a holiday, and for a treat all the kids were taken to the track. Lewie was at the stables, his face in the stalls; I cuffed him and asked him what he was doing. He was getting ready for the next race. His brow was furrowed. It turned out that the kids were betting on the races, betting their desserts. The odds on the board meant nothing to them. They had a fairer system. Lewie got first pick: he had to give the kids three and a half to one on any horse he selected. He had to *give* odds. I smiled tolerantly.

It was as good a way of teaching him the folly of gambling as any.

"How many desserts do you owe?" I asked blandly.

"Don't owe any!" he said wonderingly.

It turned out that instead of owing he was *owed* twenty-seven desserts; everybody at school was in hock to him for the remainder of the semester. He said he always picked the right horse. I asked him what animal he liked in the next race. He went over to a semicircle where they were being led around. He pushed his way through the crowd of onlookers until he was practically under the horses' feet. There, as each horse came by, he looked at it questioningly. Four of them looked right back at him, craned their necks, looked him in the eye—and made noises at him.

He came back.

"That Number Four," he said with the candor and calm of a small brother being sent to find out what time it is.

Number Four was twelve to one. He won. I got even for the day in just that one race. There were only three races left. Lewie the Horse picked the other three. Just like that. One, two, three. Four to one, six to five, and eight to one. He asked them and they told him and I bet on them. I went home delirious.

After that I wrote him long letters and made trips to his school in San Diego, trying to find out his secret. He couldn't explain it. Not in any way an adult mind could grasp.

"They tell me," he would say simply.

"How?" I'd persist.

"They just *tell* me!"

"Well, now look! Here's you and me talking, see? I tell you something—everybody can understand me—"

"Yeah. I know. They can't get over it."

"Who?"

"The horses!"

"Can't get over what?"

"You stand there wondering if they're gonna win. They tell you. And you don't believe 'em."

"Don't believe 'em?"

"No! Who do you think knows better than a horse?"

"But I don't even understand them. Hell!" I said earnestly. "I'd believe them! I don't even understand——"

"I don't know why," he'd say, patiently and virtuously. "They talk perfectly plain."

"What do they say?"

"Oh, stuff. They don't feel good, or they feel good. How they think they're gonna run, what they think of the jockey, the track, the other horses. Lotsa stuff. Gossip, mostly."

I had to see it work. My logic, that disastrous sense that teaches the difference between right and wrong to so many humans including Hitler and Chamberlain, and the fellow who sent those steers all the way from Texas to California to be milked, my logic told me that at best the kid was lying and imaginative and that at worst he actually believed what he said. The best way to break him, in either case, was to make a spectacle of him. But at the last moment my heart misgave me. Lewie was a very good boy. Very quiet and sweet. I borrowed him from school and took him up to Santa Anita.

We went back to the paddock. He stood by the ring.

"Now talk to them."

The first horse went by.

"How you going, boy?" Lewie asked.

The horse turned his head. He looked Lewie full in the eye. He made a neighing noise.

"Muh-huh-oooh-hoo-hoo-muh huh!"

The next horse came by.

"What do y' say, boy?" asked Lewie.

This horse made a different noise.

There were eight horses in that race. He talked to six of them. They talked back to him. He turned away.

"Come on," he said.

"What do you mean, 'Come on'?"

"You just want to know who's gonna win, don't you?"

"Yes. Sure. Who's going to win?"

"That Number Three."

I looked quickly at the tote board. The odds on Number Three were eight to one. I looked back at Lewie.

"How do you know?" I said suspiciously.

He reddened. He looked at me crossly. "Didn't you see me ask 'em?"

"What did they say?"

Now he was no longer bored. Now he was interested. "Number One said he was hot but he didn't like his boy. Two said absolutely no. Three said he was sore as hell and out to take everybody if he had to kick 'em over the grandstand to do it. Four didn't care one way or the other. Five had a sore back, hurting him like everything. Six said he felt good, all right, only he knew damned well Three could lick him. The other two don't count. All of them said not to pay any attention to the other two. No good."

"That's what they said!"

"Sure," he said wonderingly. "Why not?"

I stabbed a quick forefinger at him.

"Number Five's a liar then! Look at him walk! He's no sorer in the back than you are!"

Lewie the Horse looked me in the eye.

"What would he lie for?" he asked simply. "He said he's sore, he's sore."

Number Three won, going away.

Number Five broke down in the backstretch and trotted in limping.

The rest of that day was a dream. Matter-of-factly Lewie talked to the horses. Matter-of-factly they answered him back. He didn't have a form sheet. He didn't know one horse from another. He simply talked to those horses and they answered him back. It was sensational.

He picked six races out of eight. In one race the horse he picked came in second. Lewie was livid with rage. He shouted so loud that waiters came running toward us and people stood up to see what the matter was. He couldn't be silenced. He didn't even hear me.

"That dirty louse!" he screamed. "That jockey crook! That thief!" There were tears in his eyes. The jockey had pulled the horse.

Lewie never watched the horses run. He kept a pair of field glasses trained on the jockeys from the moment the race started until long after they had swept past the finish line. He watched only the jockeys.

And in the other race there were only maiden two-year-olds. He liked to talk to two-year-olds, but he said they were unreliable. They all talked big, he said, and they all meant it when they said they were going to win. But they didn't know, really, what they were talking about. They were too young.

Many a time that season Lewie wouldn't give any

counsel in certain races. He said horses were mischievous sometimes; they would all gang up and everybody try not to win. And sometimes there would be two or three or even four horses in a race, each of whom would be confident he was going to win. And sometimes there would be a race with an outstanding horse in it and the horse would say he didn't rightly know whether he felt like running or not today; and that was dangerous because, halfway around, far back of the pack, he might suddenly decide he felt like running after all and step out and win it from the horse that had said he would win if the other guy felt lazy about it.

He said horses knew their own chances just as well as human runners; figured them out, figured out the other horse's jockey, knew each other's track likings. He said some of them were chatty and some dour, just like people. He said all of them were frank; they would say whatever they had to say, candidly, right in front of the others. They kept nothing back; they almost never pulled surprises.

He told me all this much later, when school was out for the summer and we used to go out to Santa Anita every day we could spare. I am ashamed to confess it, but that year I had a bank balance that was awesome. The only reason I didn't retire was that no matter how monotonously and inexorably he picked a winner I always felt the next time he would fail. He never did. Not, that is, until he was out of high school.

His secret was very simple. He talked to the horses. They answered him.

I have noticed that if you don't tell a kid that he can't do something, something that is manifestly absurd to adult logic, the kid will simply go ahead and

do it and think nothing of it. There is a strong bond between animals and young human animals. They seem to understand each other. They seem to inhabit the same animal world. They seem to anticipate each other and to reach across the chasm of logic that separates the animal from man; they seem able to communicate silently with each other. Some kids are closer to animals than others. Lewie the Horse just communicated with them outright. And they communicated back.

I have seen him do it so many, many times. I wish he'd never lost whatever it was. I wish I'd never profaned the thing by betting on it and capitalizing in pieces of paper and disks of metal on something like that. I'm a little ashamed.

I remember the day he told Jock Whitney that a horse he once owned would win the next race. We were down at the paddock, Lewie, Gloria Swanson, Whitney, and myself. Jock snorted. The odds on the horse were twenty-two to one. Jock preferred another. Lewie said Jock's pick was lame. Jock squinted, looked again, looked very carefully, then turned to Lewie.

"That horse is sounder than you, my boy," he patronized.

The horses went on the track. The race ended. The twenty-two-to-one shot won. I didn't bet on him. Who was I to take Lewie's word against that of the renowned Jock Whitney? The horse Lewie said was lame folded in the third furlong and came in limping.

Finally the word got out, and from then on I had trouble keeping Lewie from being borrowed. Everybody wanted to take him to the track. He didn't care. He'd go with anyone. He loved to watch the horses exercise, to be near them and talk to them. Many a

morning he would get up at 3 A.M. and hitchhike twenty-five miles just to sit on the rail with a stop watch in his hand. He wanted to be a jockey. His bones were too big. Then he wanted to be a trainer. I let him have his head. I let him plan and dream his heart out. I got him books. I introduced him to owners. If it were possible for him to be a horse he would have tried for it; and I would not have balked him.

My favorite director is Sam Wood. He is a gentleman and he has tremendous knowledge of his craft and his mind is a pleasure. When Sam asked me if he could borrow Lewie and asked me to go along, I assented. Sophie Tucker went along. And Sam's lovely daughter. All the way out they kept tucking Lewie in with robes, anxiously. The day's performance opened with a horse named Cerro. Sam went down to the paddock with Lewie and me. The women stayed in the clubhouse. Sam watched Lewie talk to the horses. Then Lewie came back and said Number Seven. That was Cerro. Thirty to one.

"Number Seven," said Lewie.

Sam thanked him gravely. He didn't change expression. He walked up to the mutual window and laid a hundred on his nose. Cerro won. In our box there was absolute silence. Everybody was watching Lewie. Lewie was watching the horses pulling slowly to a halt before cantering back to the judges' stand. Finally he lowered his glasses.

"Did ya see that jock on Number Two? They ought to set down a guy like that. Lookit him!"

Sam went down and collected his three-thousand-odd dollars. The next race was something called Red Ensign.

"Number Four," said Lewie.

We bet on Number Four. Number Four won. Odds on. And then there was a blurred succession of races, winner after winner, and Sam's face was white and so was mine, for we were both plunging; Sophie Tucker, as usual with her, was betting on every horse in every race but playing Lewie's choice heavier than the rest. And even betting on every horse, she was so far ahead that she kept worrying about a holdup on the way home.

The fifth race came up. Lewie liked Number One.

Number One headed the pack by two and a half lengths. We went down to the pay-off windows. We collected our money. And Lewie was through for the day. He wouldn't pick the sixth race. Said any horse could win it. Said all of them thought they could do it.

We begged and pleaded with him.

"I can't tell you!" he cried. "They don't know themselves."

We bet anyhow. We lost. It was the same for the seventh. Only this time somebody came along with one of those hot studio-crowd tips; and we plunged. But plunged! We lost.

I hate to think about that eighth race. To this day I hate to think about it. We were frantic. There were three horses that could win, and Lewie said all three of them could win it and he wouldn't pick any of them. He was astonished at us. There were nine horses in that race, and I bet on six of them. Sophie bet on the whole nine of them—twice over. Sam bet on four red-hot tips. At the last minute he went down and bet on a hunch of his own.

We went home in a barrel.

There was all that frantic, lovely, growing money gone and we had had our hands on it, and if we'd

only quit! Lewie was calm and entirely satisfied. He'd had a day at the races. He'd talked to some swell horses, he had steeped himself in the smell, sound, sight, and touch of horses, and nothing else mattered. And it really didn't. It took me six years to realize it.

But that, at any rate, is how Lewie, now twenty and fast becoming a writer, came to be called Lewie the Horse. When he left the San Diego school the horses cried to see him go, his own horse in particular, for I saw him do it when Lewie stood in the stable and told him he was going away.

When he was sixteen he suddenly stopped talking to horses and they stopped talking back to him. He got to be a little indignant about it.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he'd sometimes say. But I think he was a little miserable. I saw him try to recapture whatever it was, now and then, but it always failed and at last he gave it up. I think he outgrew it. Perhaps the city robbed him of the bond; perhaps if he'd stayed close to horses all his life he'd have kept it. He got to fiddling with form charts and reading voraciously about horses, to replace the knowledge he used to have instinctively. He can still outhandicap any newspaper predictor in the business. He can still reach into a clear sky and pick them and stun even himself; last year he picked Bay View, and I didn't have pockets enough to put the money in. He can still ride anything that doesn't fly. He can still move among angry, kicking horses and quiet them with a pat, a cluck, an easy eye. He loves them. He reaches for them.

But it's gone.

He doesn't talk to them.

Not any more.

And they don't answer back.

Chapter XI

> The heart that has truly loved never forgets, but there's a limit to the amount of carrying on the average mortal can manage, even when someone is looking.
>
> (From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

O. HENRY wrote a great story about an editor and a writer; the writer always got rejection slips because he refused to portray his characters beating their breasts when they touched the depths of shock, or tragedy, or grief. The editor maintained that "every sudden, deep, and tragic emotion in the human heart calls forth an apposite, concordant, conformable, and proportionate expression of feeling. . . . All men and women have . . . a subconscious dramatic sense that is awakened by a sufficiently deep and powerful emotion . . . that prompts them to express those emotions in language befitting their importance and histrionic value.

"No human being," says the editor, "ever uttered banal colloquialisms when confronted by sudden tragedy."

"Wrong," says the writer. "I say no man or woman ever spouts highfalutin talk when they go up against a real climax. They talk naturally and a little worse."

O. Henry doesn't resolve the question. In the end of the story he arranges for both men to discover simultaneously that their wives have left them. Stunned, the writer bursts forth into lyric lament; the editor

fumbles with a coat button, says over and over again: "Say, Shack, ain't that a hell of a note? Wouldn't that knock you off your perch?"

I suspect O. Henry was being politic; in those days writers treated editors with considerably more respect; to prove an editorial policy wrong could mean a lot to an author's self-respect, but in the end it would cost him money.

If there is one thing I have learned from column writing it is that human beings are miscast for anything but comedy; the lower the comedy the more fitting the performance. Somehow we mortals don't fit high tragedy. We can't live up to it; the tragedy is always more tragic than the human who endures it. This is not a cynicism; it is an observation; it is one of the soberer facts of life a columnist learns early. You can tell a funny story in sixty seconds and bring down a whole nation in laughter; but if you are going to tell a story as tragic as that story was funny, then you have to start back at least a mile and go into training and take a deep breath and start leaking tears and keep on dripping them and dripping them, artfully, little by little, until everybody is wet and in a mood for the lightning you intend to appall them with, and even then some dolt is just as like as not to spoil it all by laughing just in the most serious, sorrowful part. Nobody ever makes a mistake and cries at the point of a funny story. The reason a tragic story is dangerous and the reason people spoil it by laughing when they're not supposed to is because high tragedy applied to a human is ridiculous; we just aren't fit for it and can't live up to it and aren't nearly noble enough for it and that's a tragedy all in itself.

The writer was right. The editor was dead wrong.

I once watched a little spindly man rush into a burning building and rescue, one after another, four comely young women, all of them overcome by smoke; it was the dead of night and they had been sleeping and when they awakened the flames had trapped them. When he laid the last victim on the sidewalk the little spindly man staggered a few steps, reeled, collapsed in agony. He had been painfully burned.

Now that was as heroic a deed as you might expect to see; all the women outweighed him, none of the crowd that wrung their hands and cringed from the flames dared venture that inferno once, let alone four times. The fire department clanged up and an ambulance lugged the victims and their rescuer off to a hospital. You might have thought that poor fellow was a hero. Quentin Durward didn't do as much, Blondel hadn't so much trouble, Nelson was just doing his job; all of them expected to get something out of what they did. This little spindly chap just had a tobacco shop next door, and instead of trying to save what he could from his own premises when he woke and smelled smoke, he rushed to the aid of the neighbors. He was a hero, if ever I saw one; and yet when I came to write the story and make a high tragedy of it and a saga of bravery and self-sacrifice that might ennoble my readers, I broke down and I just couldn't do it. There wasn't an angle I could touch. In the first place that burning building was a two-story brothel; four of the girls lived on the premises; and a late caller had started the blaze by leaving behind him a burning cigarette which had fallen onto a sofa in the upstairs parlor. And there he was, lugging out whore after whore, this little spindly man who went to church every Sunday and didn't even know

the place next door was a brothel, and each of them weighed a lot more than he did, and after he had at the risk of his life rescued them all from death the police booked the whole four of them the minute they were recovered enough to leave the hospital. His own personal injuries deserved mention; unfortunately they had struck him in an unmentionable place: his bottom was burned. In the rush and amazement of leaving his shop and plunging to the rescue he had neglected to put his pants on.

Now that follows the pattern of human living and is a living instance of why tragedy is incapable of evoking a fitting reaction among humans. The broad facts are a saga; when you come down to examine them they are mostly just low comedy.

I can remember the first tragedy of any consequence I covered in California. I was working on a small daily paper in Oceanside, along the coast, and I had a column in it. One night the editor was visiting in a near-by town; an oil tank blew up and killed two men. I couldn't find anybody to cover the story, so I plunged into it myself. I had only been in the town two weeks. I hardly knew anyone. I figured the undertaking parlor would be my best bet, found out which one they had taken the men to, and raced on over. No one was saying anything pending the arrival of the coroner from San Diego; the oil company had big holdings in Oceanside and they weren't letting anything out.

There was only one man at the undertaking parlor: he was the undertaker. He had laid the two bodies out in different rooms, not being equipped for so much business all at once, and he was distracted. His helper was gone. Hoping to get him to talk, I offered to help him. His face cleared.

"Okay," he said. "You sew that one"—he pointed to the least damaged relic—"and I'll work over this other guy."

He handed me a needle and catgut, told me not to bother with the face, he'd tend to that himself, and went on about his business. I must have spoken with considerable assurance, for he treated me just like a brother sewer. He left the door of the next room open. I fired questions at him through this aperture and he readily answered back. The explosion had been Homeric. These two men had been working on top of the oil tank, making repairs. It was full of gasoline. Nobody could account for the explosion; he'd heard some folks say it was a spark from a tool striking the tank's steel sides; others said it was a lightning bolt; everybody was saying behind their hands that the men had a good suit against the company, no matter what caused it. It was the second explosion in that yard that year and there was bound to be an investigation. After the first stitch I didn't mind it; I darned away as I used to do with my socks at prep school, and in those days everybody in my house thought I was pretty good. I had gotten halfway up the inside of one leg and was beginning really to enjoy myself and cut loose with a fancy thought here and there when the door opened and the undertaker chap came alongside. He stood there watching me a moment. I looked around at him. He looked away from my handiwork and stared at me.

"Pretty fancy," he said dubiously.

"You think so?" I asked anxiously.

"Sure is!" he said. He cleared his throat. "I'm using baseball stitches."

He took over then, and in no time he had that fel-

low laced up and set to rights; alongside my thoughtful work his looked sensible and proper and down to earth and no nonsense about it. Those chaps had rocketed maybe two hundred feet in the air in an explosion that broke windows; their names were on everyone's tongue, their histories were being bandied reverently, their widows consoled, their children patted, half the town was looking with upraised eyes at heaven one minute and dropping their eyes and shaking their heads and sighing the next, over the appalling catastrophe that for this hour raised these broken men as gods. The undertaker shook his head in wonder over the event, but even for Oedipus one stitch is as good as another and a baseball stitch is faster and he worked sensibly and deftly over these symbols of one high, shining, tragic hour and tied up the result neatly in baseball stitches.

O. Henry knew the answer to the question he raised in that story of his, "The Proof of the Pudding." Even though he left the question unanswered and thus did not kick the wrist that wrote him checks, he knew the answer.

Said the author bitterly to the editor:

"When the man with the black mustache kidnaps golden-haired Bessie, you are bound to have the mother kneel and raise her hands in the spotlight and say: 'May high heaven witness that I will rest neither night or day till the heartless villain that has stolen me child feels the weight of a mother's vengeance!' "

"I think," the editor smiles complacently, "that in real life the woman would express herself in those words or very similar ones."

"I'll tell you what she'd say in real life," retorts the writer. "She'd say: 'What! Bessie led away by a

strange man? Get my other hat; I must hurry around to the police station. Why wasn't somebody looking after her, I'd like to know? For God's sake get out of my way or I'll never get ready. Not that hat—the brown one with the velvet bows. . . . Is that too much powder? Lordy! How I'm upset!'"

Oh, O. Henry knew the answer, all right. It's a melancholy sort of answer to face, somehow. It doesn't seem fair. When a man's got tragedy to face he ought to be given the face to face it with. Yet of all the tragedies I've covered, only two were not comic, could not be made comic; and even though they were greater than the frail mortals they visited, and the mortals could not possibly fit the stature of the parts they played, they have remained tragedies, unforgettable, pure; and at least one of them is eternal.

The one death scene that symbolizes for me the point O. Henry raised occurred in Hollywood, in the Hollywood Police Receiving Hospital. A mother, a stout woman, gray, poorly dressed, forty-five, driving to school to pick up her two children, ran into a tree. When they brought her into the receiving hospital she was dying. The doctor labored frantically. The nurse injected adrenalin; the doctor wheeled up the oxygen tank; he put the rubber mask over her face. She was unconscious; her breath was laboring; her hands were nerveless, waxy gray.

A policeman opened the operating-room door and waved the woman's two children into the room. The boy was sixteen, the girl fourteen, tall, thin, gangling, frightened, shocked out of their wits. They stood against the wall. They watched every move. The boy began to cry softly. The woman's breathing became fainter and fainter. Oxygen kept hissing into her

mouth from the mask over her face. The hissing sound and the boy's slow crying were the only sounds in the room. The woman's breathing stopped. The oxygen hissed on. Over her face it spread and into her quiet, lifeless lungs, life-giving, finding no life to give itself to; the doctor kept his stethoscope to her chest; he listened long, long after there was nothing to which to listen. The children did not move. The doctor took the stethoscope from his ears. The oxygen continued to hiss imperturbably. The woman was quite dead.

"Take it away," the doctor said at last.

The nurse turned a petcock. The hissing stopped. She lifted the flat rubber mask from the woman's face. Her lips were open; they were becoming pale; her eyes stared tenantlessly through the ceiling.

The boy could not look.

"Mom, Mom, Mom!" he begged. "How we gonna get home? Mom? Listen, Mom!"

The girl began to cry. She seized the dead woman's hand. She pumped it up and down in quick, sharp jerks.

"He's right!" she sobbed. "Listen, listen! He's right, he's right, he's right!"

They led the boy out, sobbing brokenly. The girl followed, shambling, after. They were utterly dazed; it had happened all in a flash, without warning, without logic, without thought. Six months before their father had been killed. Now, outside it was sunshine, their mother had come to pick them up, their mother was dead. Their mother was that dead woman in there. She wouldn't take them home.

It was beyond human experience, beyond human expression; it always is. There are no such things as

heroics; there never are. We are children and Destiny is our father; he has a language we do not speak.

There were two stories that had the indestructible stuff of tragic tapestry.

The first concerns a grubby little girl. I had a small weekly newspaper on the outskirts of Los Angeles. It was nearing Christmas, and for an advertising sales stunt I ran a contest for children; the town merchants took a full-page ad, each with a box describing the quality of his Christmas merchandise and below, in blackface type, the particular prize he was offering. The prize was to go to the child who wrote the best letter to Santa Claus.

Letters began to slither in, dozens of them. There is nothing more contenting. The merchants were happy at the response. The community was a small one; it had a main street five blocks long that was the business district; touching the town's borders were dairies and small dairy-cattle herds; and at one end there was a vacant lot where there were always hay trucks and piled bales of alfalfa. Advertising was a reluctant habit; response was never marked; but it was no cheaper to have the sales announcements printed and delivered, so the paper got the ads and struggled on. But the response to this stunt was news in itself; on the second week the handful of merchants backing the contest decided to continue out of pure amazement.

The letters continued to make little heaps all over my desk. The contest was assuming proportions. The prizes were increased. I had to run a short warning that parents weren't allowed to help write letters to Santa: a half-dozen letters were palpable frauds. Toward press day of the third week The Letter came in; the writer brought it herself; she hadn't the money

for a stamp. I looked up. She was a grubby girl; her dress had been torn in places and badly mended. She wore long black stockings and one of these was torn; the other was loose, bagged down over her thin knee. She walked toward me with a peculiar mincing step: it was plain to see that her shoes were far too small; she had outgrown them and outworn them and they hurt her feet. She stood by my desk and looked at me warily; she put her hair back from her cheek with one reddened hand; I judge she was eight, perhaps nine years old, although her hands and her eyes looked older.

Her errand was simple enough. She had written her letter to Santa Claus on lined school-pad paper, with a frequently wetted pencil; she had come to deliver it in person, first because she had no stamp, and second because she wanted to be sure it would reach Santa Claus, the person to whom it was addressed.

I reassured her; I told her I would take care of it personally. When she left I opened it and read it. Here is the letter:

DEAR SANDY:

I am eight years old. My brother is three years old. We live in the house next to the Severns. It is behind the Severns house. Mummy said that was why you missed us last year. Please Sandy find us this year. I have been a good girl. I have minded Albert all day long. I have kept the house clean for papa. Sandy last year I asked a doll. I don't want a doll anymore. I want my mummy. Please Sandy mummy died. She isn't here anymore. Please Sandy bring me my mummy. I love you Sandy.

MARY ELIZABETH WILLETS

P.S. I have been a good girl.

I am glad it happened years ago; she is by this time grown up, perhaps a mother herself; long, long grown over waiting for a gift no one could give her. It got its prize as inevitably as a page of Homer vying with a page from the city directory. For miles around people drove in bringing baskets for her. They could not have abated her appeal; in that drama she was a protagonist beyond earth.

Many a great thought is born from natural effects. Mona Bonelli's one-time nurse and now her mother's loved companion heard with her usual wide-eyed concern the reading of a letter from Mona's brother, a naval officer stationed on Guadalcanal.

"I will never hear the word 'rain' again without shuddering," the letter said. "Incredible as it may seem to you at home, during the past five weeks fourteen feet of rain fell here. . . ."

"Fourteen feet of rain!" Millie echoed sharply and incredulously.

"That's what it says, Millie. Fourteen feet—in five weeks."

"My God!" breathed Millie piously. "No wonder it's an island!"

Like Millie, I do not know whether this story is true: I was not there when it happened. But many a legend was once a true story and it was told me with the liveliest protestations of its utter veracity and I have seen nothing in life to make me doubt its natural effects. And for me, with the possible exception of one story too grim to print, it sums up this chapter and the whole gamut of human "tragedy."

It concerns an actor. He was a run-of-the-mill actor, one of those unfortunates in whom the flame of dedi-

cation is hopelessly brighter than potentiality, a man steadfastly and with the purest motives devoted to his art and who has only mediocrity with which to show his devotion.

He had been without work for eight months. He had a wife and two daughters. They loved him dearly. Without a word of reproach and with clear understanding they suffered with him poverty and the shame of the landlord. They followed his ideal as he followed it and his gods were their gods and about him their whole sorry lives revolved.

He was a good father, he loved his wife and he loved his two daughters, and often he cursed the fate that had made him an actor.

At the end of the eighth month he was beyond cursing. There was nothing left to sell or pawn in the flat. The landlord was about to evict them. He had only one suit of clothes, a hat, and a pair of shoes, and a silver-headed cane left. His wife had pawned or sold almost all of her own and the children's clothes. They had been living on one bottle of milk and a loaf of bread a day for many days. He had descended to borrowing quarters and half dollars, and now he was no longer able even to borrow these small sums. They were beyond ruin. They were beyond destitution. They had come to the bitter end.

When he met in the street a director he once knew he did not hesitate to ask him for thirty-five cents for carfare. It would have bought milk and bread for three days. The director was a kindly man. He knew actors. He knew what the actor wanted the thirty-five cents for. He did not give him the thirty-five cents. Instead he nearly felled him to the sidewalk with the magnitude of his offering. A new play was opening.

There was a small role to be filled. He offered the actor the job.

They cried and clung to one another in the tiny flat that night. They laughed and cried and begged each other to be calm. Father had a job. Father was going to work again. Ah, it took talent, that's all it took, just talent; a man's talent might be bruised, might be denied, he might go hungry for it, but in the long run, make no mistake about it, in the long run it'd be recognized, he'd come through. Wasn't it worth it? Didn't every great man have to put up with his hard knocks until a great director came along and recognized him for what he was?

Of course Father didn't actually have the job, yet. He was just going to try out at rehearsals. But that was just a matter of form when you came right down to it. All a man had to do, after all, was last five days. That's all. If an actor wasn't fired at the end of five days of rehearsals, why then he was safe. They might fire him on the sixth day. But they had to pay him a whole two weeks' salary. That was the Equity rule. When you came right down to it all Father had to do was last five days. Just a measly five days.

They got to bed late that night. Mother and the two daughters had much patching and mending to do to put Father's one suit and his linen in shape for tomorrow. Shakily, Father studied his script. Far into the night they mended, patched, ironed, studied.

And the next day, with his life depending on it, with his family in the balance, Father got his cue, went on, muffed the easiest lines any actor has ever been called upon to read. Too much was depending on it. Eight months, too, is a long time, but it is a very short time in which to grow rusty. He muffed

and he muffed terribly, and from their seats in the front of the theater the producer nudged the director irritably and asked him where in the hell he'd picked up *that* imbecile.

It was just a moment in the pageant of rehearsals, but it was all the tragedy the traffic would bear for the actor and, back at home, for the unknowing wife and two thin daughters. The director didn't really care much but he told the producer the actor had been out of work for a long time.

"He'll be all right in a day or so," he said confidently.

The producer nodded absently. Rehearsals were moving on. In the wings the actor mopped the cold sweat from his forehead and wandered furtively out of sight. The day ended. The first day was over. He fled unsteadily home. There they flung themselves upon him, they all cried a little, they set about mending and furbishing him anew. They had saved the day's share of milk for him. They patted him fondly, proudly. He had lasted out the first day.

The second day he was not called. He slunk about the theater uncertainly, keeping out of sight of the director. Between rests he prayed they would not call him. They did not call him and that night at home they clung to him and wept anew.

But on the third day, almost before he could go into hiding, they called him again and once again he was suddenly, horribly, on stage and all he had learned and all he knew deserted him. His knees were wet paper, his voice croaked, he could barely hold the script in his hands.

"Well?" said the producer to the director.

"I guess you're right," the director said reluctantly.

"I didn't even think he was still around," the producer said indignantly.

"Okay," said the director.

The show went on. There was no hope left in the actor's heart and there was no doubt either. It was the first job he had had in eight months. Next job he would be better, next job he would have more confidence, next job would be possible because of what two whole weeks' wages would buy. There was the landlord, there was the food, there were his wife and his two daughters, and all of these things are part of the next job and part of every job, and he knew desperately and, frightened white and sick, what he had to do. He had to keep out of the director's sight. He had to dodge the discharge he knew was coming. And somehow he managed it.

Somehow, all during the fourth day, stealing behind scenes, lurking in the men's room, hiding in the gallery, darting here, there, and everywhere in abject terror, he managed to keep out of sight and out of mind.

The kids stayed out of school the fifth day to see their father off to work. This was the day. They cried a little as they wished him luck and kissed him and he strode jauntily out of their sight, twirling the silver-headed cane. But when he was out of their sight he ran as fast as his patched shoes would let him and the shirt they'd washed for him overnight was damp, part with fear and part with running, when he arrived at the theater. He rushed past the doorman. As he went he thought he heard him call after him and he ran faster. That day was a horror. Twice in the morning and twice again in the afternoon his name was called and he crouched trembling and weak each time

while a mild hunt for him went on. He doubled back and forth from all his hiding places. The day dragged on, hour by frightened hour. It was nearly quitting time. All he had to do was reach quitting time. This was the fifth day. If they had not given him his notice by quitting time they would have to pay him two weeks' salary even if they fired him the next morning.

Almost all of the cast had gone. And then he, hiding in the gallery, was the last of the cast left. The cast had been dismissed. And now slowly, with fearful care, he made his way toward the back of the stage, inches at a time. And now, unnoticed, he was backstage. And there were fifteen yards of open space between him and the stage door. Half fainting, white, hardly breathing, he sauntered into the open and made for the door. He was only a few feet away from it when the doorman came up from behind and clapped him on the shoulder. The actor turned slowly. His body sagged.

"For you," the doorman said. He was holding out an envelope.

Blindly, numbly, the actor reluctantly dragged up his hand for it. This was it, then. This was his notice, and he'd almost made it; just a few feet more and he'd have made it, just a second more . . .

Mechanically he opened the envelope. Mechanically he began to read. And then, of a sudden, his face illumined, his eyes became radiant. He was smiling. He lifted his eyes from the letter to the doorman.

The blessedness of relief transfigured him.

"Mother's dead!" he croaked, and grinned and closed his eyes, and passed happily from the theater.

Chapter XII

The man who said that half a loaf was better than none was a woman.
(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

Someday I will get the manuscript for *The Naked Countess* back from Benchley and he will write me the introduction for *Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player* for it.

In the interval which has sagged away since this book was almost finished I have been in the Army and I am consequently in a position to write very feelingly about food, but as I am still in the Army this sometimes does not appear altogether expedient. All in all, this book long ago began to look like a book which never in God's world would get finished and it only proves what I knew long ago: that the more you put it off the more they will start wars, and the first thing you know you are in them and then you'll be sorry you didn't finish it in the first place, when you were red hot and could have knocked it off like pie.

There is much to be said about pie, but I am not the man to do it. So far as I am concerned the only kind of good pie is meat pie and the only kind of meat pie is the one I am going to describe for you, a glamor pie, an exotic survival from the early Incas, a mad, primitive, wild thing, calculated to make brides of the taste buds and courtesans of the digestive juices,

an immoral pie, sweet with the juices of deception, significant as a rumpled sheet, invincible as the last moment. It is sometimes very hard for me to be sure what I am swooning with in my hand, a fork, or whatever, but that is because Nature made us all in one piece, like a tuning fork, and the clatter of silverware will set us vibrating to the same note as a sonata, or the lovely, lovely note of the second shoe dropping.

I am stationed now in a California foxhole listed as Sacramento, and in a little while I will be off duty and when I am off duty I will go into Sacramento and get down to Skid Row where the food is best, and I will slaunch in to El Rancho Viejo and ask for Tlaloc Pie. When I do this Gonzales, who owns the place when he is sober, although most of the time he owns all Mexico and is negotiating for an alliance with Canada, will smile as one connoisseur to another, as a man suffering a little agony from the infinite exact correctness of my desire, as a man desolated that he is the best man in the world who can set such a dish before me but is alas, only the world's best man, and in a few moments he will come back with Carne Adobada, the house special for the day and very cheap at only forty-five cents. I know it will be Carne Adobada, and not Tlaloc Pie, because last week it was Tortittas de Camarrone, and before that it was Chuchitas, and before that it was Cabeza and Chili Verde and Mole de Guajalote and all the rest of the way down the menu. Always we will smile together and ignore the fact that it is not Tlaloc Pie.

It will never be Tlaloc Pie until I can get back to that little joint in Mexicali, half brothel and half restaurant and just a quick, flaps-down stagger to the Mexicali brewery.

I don't like beer. I don't know why I don't like it. I've tried to like it. All through Prohibition I drank it out of tomato cans, through raid after raid, and although it was flavored with crime and brewed by a daft forger, a great *Braumeister* the boys had sprung and installed in the Press Club to do nothing but make us beer, I have always hated the taste of it. The delight of my friends in this simple, historic beverage has sent me back, again and again, to sample Heineken's and Veinte Siglo, that great amber beer of Mexico that does not travel, and once I even went to Santa Rosa to try a mythical something called Steam Beer, and the bottom of the glass is always the same —some is better than others and I don't like beer.

This stuff I get in Mexicali I don't call beer at all. The brewery there calls it that but it is only the curse of trade, looking always sorrowfully for a label. It resembles more the yellow laughter of a girl you have been chasing all day and whom you have at last caught and now stand sighing beside. All the brooks you leaped over in the chase are there and the woods you tore through and the hot dust of the meadows, but the torment is gone from them and it is only you who are hot and not the day and the laughter is cool in your ears and does not stop even when the glass is empty. That's a hell of a way to go on about a glass of beer but that's what Mexicali beer is like. It doesn't seem to travel, either. I, who am no lover of beer, downed pitchers of it, tried to bring a case of it back to Tia Juana with me, driving across a modicum of desert, and when I opened it and drank some in Tia Juana it was only beer, with the same taste I had been indomitably trying to like all my life. But in Mexicali this day it was different. In the first place I was hot.

My face was streaming and it was too much effort to wipe it; my feet were wet in their cursed socks; my very liver was bubbling. I had been waiting outside a city hall while two friends in the office of some official pursued the interminable business of delicately bribing the official to allow them to have B girls in their Tia Juana bistro. It got hotter and hotter and finally I was very cross because I was just standing there and not dying, when they emerged decorously and we all got into a hellbox of a sedan in which to touch metal meant the instant loss of an arm, and they drove me dying to this small sweltering Mexicali joint which, as I have said, was half restaurant and half whorehouse.

And it was in this condition, my throat steaming like an angry kettle, my pores, emptied of further water, erupting my very manhood, that they pushed at me a pitcher of Mexicali beer. It was made only a few blocks away. It had just been delivered. It was cold, the pitcher's white crockery was beaded with the agony with which it prayed to be drunk. I think it had a handle. I don't know. I didn't stop drinking until the pitcher was empty. And it was only then that I tasted it. It had a taste completely unlike beer. The bubbles of it dribbled like drunken chamois over my swollen tongue, stung the back of my throat like a flirtatious girl feeling your muscles, cascaded down and soulward with the sweet rush of a modest woman whose nightgown you have hidden flinging herself into bed. I cannot describe the taste of it. I cannot bring the picture to you because I have never drunk anything like it. It would be like trying to describe to you what a sprig of plucked Silantro does to a bowl of cabbage, chick-pea, and rice soup. I can only say

that it tasted like color and it was a pale tawny and that was exactly what it tasted like.

But I was cool, then, when I had finished the pitcher, and I was quite cool and I remembered before the last glass was altogether down that I had not eaten since breakfast. This was a vacation time and you know how it is on vacation: one slyly tosses one's morals a little aside, one tends to riot and loose clothes and carnal things. I had eaten a baby boy lobster for breakfast, dripping with the rich golden chocolate of Mole, a sauce compounded of the edible fringe of a Mexican's dream of many sons, a sprinkling of New World chocolate, seven spices which I decline to reveal, the strained juice of a tomato, and a gravy bubbling with humor, confident as a bridegroom, and blended with the low bass of an organ. I was hungry again.

It is when you are hungriest that you should try new dishes. You might never like them if hunger did not bridge the small, soon forgotten pain of the First Trial. So when I saw "Frijoles Refritos con Pastellito de Pedernis" I knew I must have it. I no longer call it by its Mexicali name. I call it Tlaloc Pie. A long time ago, long, long before America was discovered, the red bean of Mexico was a god. It was worshiped as such, and its name was Tlaloc. Now the red bean of Mexico is not like any other bean you have tasted. It scorns any kinship with the pallid flecks of New England and the dissolute, flabby kidney bean. It is a god. I should not doubt but that it contributes a little of its godship to the tissues of all who eat it; I have never felt quite the same from that day to this.

Stripped of its mandolin, the dish says plainly: Mexican beans, boiled, drained, then fried; and broiled

quail, a light gravy, the whole enclosed between two paper-thin tortillas. Give me that mandolin again. As to the beans—the Mexican bean is somewhat smaller than the kidney bean; it is maroon, it is ensorcelled on the vine by the Mexican sun, it is pestered by the Mexican moon, and the small golden feet of the girls who walk in the furrow don't do it any harm either. When it is boiled it tastes a little like roasted chestnut crisped with the odorous fog of browned wheat flour; the integument, the understanding which weds these two flavors and adds an indescribable flavor of its own, is from the happy blood stream of the god-bean, the juices which arise from the nurturing Mexican earth, the Mayan dews, the tears dropped by Mexico's lonely stars, the loneliest stars in the universe. Boiled, the bean crunches crispwetly in the mouth, the ruddy essences of its flavor creep beneath the tongue, the mouth swirls with fluid flavor. Boiled and set to cool, then ladled patteringly over the thick iron bottom of a skillet and set on a slow fire, the Tlaloc accumulates an even crisper exterior; inside there is firm softness which dissolves as a red, thick gravy of indescribable primitive concern. Now the unguent of its juices keeps each bean adherent to its crisp comrade; it is ready to be served.

There is first the matter of a gravy, or dowry, to be arranged. Usually the juices of chili verde, the gulping breath of green chilies, boiled sun-cured beef, the fragrant dried leaf of orégano, a clove of garlic, and a crumpled leaf of bay serve for the gravy. The match is suitable for Tlaloc bean and broiled quail alike. The quail is broiled breast down, stuffed with Chorizos, the pungent Mexican sausage, and basted with butter. Sliced and chopped into mouth-size frag-

ments, the broiled quail, its best man, the Chorizo, and the butter which glazes both their expectant bodies is ready to plunge into the chili verde gravy with the unpossessed red-brown bean. A suitable bed for this nuptial is a tortilla made of corn which has been hand-ground into coarse flour on a stone in the kitchen, to which has been added sufficient clear water to make a thin dough, which is slapped then, back and forth, between the lovely palms of the daughter of the house until it is thin as paper, round as a dinner plate, ready for the hot, brief kiss of the oven. Crisp, crunchy beans, broiled quail, Chorizo, and the dazing unction of the gravy merge upon this corn wafer and over the top, to preserve the proprieties and veil the consummatory rites, is placed still another tortilla.

One's entire life changes at the first dripping forkful. The taste buds become statesmen, the mouth becomes a market place where all the tags that are memorable are automatically present, crystal-clear, the brain is fathoms deep and mountains high, but the stomach, the amazed and incredulous stomach, becomes instantly all the organs of the body. It would be indelicate to describe those never-ending gastric orgasms, those jejunal jerks, those duodenal diddlings, those hepatic heaves and sigmoid sighs as Tlaloc Pie makes its virgin appearance in the regions below the last rib. And this is the wonder of it: no matter how many times you eat it, it is always as though this time were the shy first.

I am a great believer in food. As one grows older this belief is a concomitant credo of a body less and less athletically suited to more lectual pleasures. But I have been a believer in food ever since I can remember. I can remember a long time. The beginnings

of gustatory delight I learned in the kitchens of my father's hotels, from one after the other of which I was officially expelled for grand theft, and from which establishments, though not the kitchens, I was after puberty regularly and officially expelled for other felonies. My stanch boyhood friend, when I was home from school for some holiday or other, was Peter. He was an Alsatian, of the nation which excretes the best chefs in the world and keeps the really best for Alsatians and for God.

The earliest things I can remember going criminal about are lobster and macaroon paste. Hotels buy lobsters in great quantities, and hotels with eleven dining rooms, such as the hotel we made our headquarters in and in which Lewis was born, habitually keep quite a lot of lobster. It was my felonious six-year-old custom to pick an hour in the afternoon when I knew things were most quiet to go down to the kitchen, to open the huge doors of any of a dozen iceboxes, to walk in, to start eating at the door, and to emerge only after I had made the rounds. And I always stole a whole lobster. I ate all the lobster I could, but I always stole a whole one, just in case. I don't know in case of what. I just stole it. Now when I had made the rounds of that icebox and emerged I invariably headed for the pastry cook's icebox. This held, in addition to dough and eggs and whipping cream and cherries and all the staggering, glorious things of which a pastry cook's world is made, a half-dozen tins of macaroon paste. The tins were each the size of a wastebasket. They were hotel size. Have you ever eaten macaroon paste? Reader, I used to dip a six-year-old fist—I have a broad palm—into one of those cans and pull up the fist only when it could hold

no more, and when I had brought it up I would cram the whole lovely, almond-gluey mass into the most waiting mouth in North America. I would repeat this performance. I would simply cram down macaroon paste on top of the lobster and such sundry appetizers as breast of guinea hen, raw filet mignon (Mother was then in the throes of eschewing all meat for growing children), cold broiled duck livers, pheasant pâté, and giant olives, until I, even I, could hold no more of absolutely anything. Then I would assume the cold gaze of a child who has after all just been looking around his own father's kitchen, and I would sally forth, meticulously closing the heavy door behind me and leaving practically everything untouched.

It was at the door of the pastry cook's icebox that Peter always trapped me. His back would be turned during the entire performance. But when he heard that door shut he laid down the pen with which he had been penning, he sighed his 250-pound body in its white starched clothes, he clambered heavily down from the high stool of the chief chefs of all the chefs, and he walked to me and held out his hand. I had to take his hand. I don't know why. Maybe I just felt guilty. I always had to take that huge wonderful ham of a hand. And the minute my little pud was buried in that prehensile digital gadget of Alsace we started the rounds. It was the price I paid. We started at the first range and we didn't miss a range. There must have been thirty yards of ranges. And at every range, the attendant cook standing respectfully aside, Peter would explain to me what was cooking and how it was being cooked and why. I learned resentfully how to cook a Peacock in its Piety—the breast illumined with Goldwasser and alternate bands of paprika, the skin

sewed on after the bird was cooked, to be snipped at the table. I learned how to cook every variety of meat and bird, how to cook everything that wore a shell or feathers or hide or skin. Not vegetables, though. That, for Peter, was for scullery cooks. And do you know, in spite of all the sullen resistance, some of it has stuck. For Peter, who had been with Delmonico's and Rector's and the Crillon, and other places where you paid even for the privilege of waiting on table, was a great, great chef. He was a great maître d'hôtel. But he was an unbelievable chef. He could take the dark meat of a tough chicken, a thumbnail of glaze, a fire, and a handful of inconsequences and bring forth a miracle great as birth. And some of what he told me stuck.

He was not too happy in America. The way he figured it, only the rich were defiant; only those with enough money not to care what people thought about their daughters marrying coachmen had sufficient guts to go about the carnal business of eating with unaffected love.

It was Peter's credo, and it is my credo also, that women are the natural enemies of good food. The entire enjoyment of food is a masculine virtue; to the canons of women it is the Primal Lust. It is that lust which nulls the force and effect and all the implements of woman; in the grip of it a man's nostrils will ignore perfume, his eyes will look through artful lace and white skin, his ears cannot hear the Lorelei, his skin feels no caress. A woman ceases to be Woman and becomes a dimly perceived and sexless human across the table. Any substance which can thus obliterate woman, which can void the most profound, most ageless exertions of which she is a symbol, is not illogically a woman's natural enemy. For love, which is a

woman's whole existence, and food do not mix. It is tolerably notorious that a man in love has no appetite. That is partly because love is an imponderable, like womanliness, or virtue. When the imponderable becomes concrete, when love, as the saying goes, is consummated, then he can eat again and a part of her dominion goes, for she is no longer unattainable. Warily, women here and there make common cause with their natural enemy, become good cooks, thus feel not so much left out in the cold.

But for most women, cooking skill denied them (it seems hardly sporting to bring up the obvious fact that the best cooks are men), the solution is simply to try their best to make a man ashamed of his appetite, of his longing for fine food, of his desire for gustatory adventure. They have inflicted on a staggering segment of the population the credo that eating is a necessary carnal business best got through briskly, that to hunger after strange dishes is immoral, to ask for a second helping is gluttony, to use spices is outlandish and probably bestial, and to seek new foods is low and bohemian. Food is their natural enemy. They fight with what weapons they can muster. And on the American continent they have made food what it is today. In your women's magazines food is advertised most successfully when it appeals to women on the basis of virginity, daintiness, or simply not as food at all, but a faërie something which is not base, which has certainly no lust, and which appeals to a far, far different word than the word "appetite."

It is nice to sneak up on simple, God-fearing people with some startling question about food. It is a subject on which folk shock very easily. To say you like sugar on your beans will evoke greater horror in the listener

than a tale of incest; even when the listener readily admits he likes Boston baked beans and you tell him brown sugar is sprinkled on them liberally—and molasses too—he will never admit he likes sugar on his beans. He will only confess, and uncertainly, now, that he doesn't mind Boston baked beans, now and then.

It is the same with oil and vinegar on potatoes—people will gag at the very idea but go right on eating potato salad—and with sugar on meat—baked Virginia ham—and with almost any dish commonly eaten and seldom analyzed. But once a human can be persuaded to examine his daily food pattern, and to look upon the ingredients that compose it, he can thereafter be tempted into trying almost any new and bizarre dish.

One afternoon at Jerry Kern's house the Scotswoman who cooked was off for the afternoon and Jerry wanted a light lunch. From some previous experience I knew that would mean a white cheese and some sliced raw apple, some crackers and some coffee. The only way I knew to get him to taste what I had in mind was to appeal to his sense of personal courage and his dislike for Babbitry. I made him a salad. He ate it. He still talks about it (if I seem shameless, remember that I didn't invent it), and while he may have been medium fearless before about trying new dishes, he is now venturesome as the best. After he ate it I reminded him of what was in it. There is little question, he said didactically, but that this is one of the best man-salads contrivable.

You use malt vinegar, pepper and salt, garlic, oil, four soft-boiled eggs, two cupfuls of diced toast, half a cup or more of coarse grated Romagna cheese, a bit of lemon, and a couple of heads of romaine.

You mix vinegar and oil to taste. Don't beat it, just mix it sufficiently, and for the Lord's sake stop mixing long before the oil and vinegar make a milky fluid. You boil the eggs exactly two minutes. Never more. If you live in some region where eggs boil quickly, boil them less.

In the bottom of a big wooden or china bowl put the leafed romaine and sprinkle the Romagna cheese over every leaf. Then break the eggs over the cheesed lettuce. Now add black pepper—should be ground in a hand mill—and salt, sprinkling both over the eggs, lettuce, and cheese. Sprinkle a chopped clove of garlic. Put your diced toast over all this. Then pour over the vinegar and oil and a fine grating of lemon peel and the juice of half a lemon. Work fast now. Turn everything upside down so that the contents of the bowl is well mixed. Use a wooden spoon. When all is mixed, serve it right out of the bowl.

Guys go crazy.

You can substitute Parmesan, grated, and wine vinegar for the malt. You can use small hunks of toasted, buttered Italian or French bread instead of toast. Main thing is, don't toss it so much the toast gets soggy and the romaine gets wilted. Won't hurt, though. Just better the other way.

Soup is soup, and generally you can figure just about how it will taste as you raise the spoon to your mouth. If you want an entirely new taste sensation—new to *you,* brother, old, old, old below the border—buy some coriander seed someday and plant it in a flower pot. When it comes up, throw a dozen or more leaves, stalk and all, into a plate of soup. It doesn't matter what kind of soup it is. It just doesn't matter. It was meant for Caldo, a thin soup made with boiled

potato, cabbage leaves, rice, a spot of hot peppers, and garbanzos. But it'll revolutionize any soup. And there just isn't any way in the world to describe the startling, glorious flavor to you. It's murder. Just sheer murder.

That's about enough pioneering. When I was running the old column I learned not to infiltrate a whole army in one day. The way you do is just bring up platoon by platoon. I used to run quite a few food columns in on my parishioners. But it was only after two, three years that they got so they took me seriously enough to try the outlandish recipes out. There was one, for instance, on how to cook a turkey. I always ran it just around Thanksgiving. The first year that column ran, it was received with broad grins. All my readers thought I was kidding. The second year a few tried it, the rest kept on grinning. The third year there were more converts. About the time of the fourth year, the Domestic Science Editor of the paper asked me if I wouldn't give a lecture on How to Cook a Turkey before a group of women in the paper's auditorium. Naturally, feeling the way I feel about women and food, I said yes. I was sorry later. When I got on that damned rostrum and looked out at those bright, merry faces all gathered to see a mere man make a jerk of himself fooling around with stuff they felt belonged in a woman's province, it was all I could do to keep from nancing out and just making a joke of the whole thing. But then I got kind of sore. I was going to demonstrate a simplified method. I decided to snow them under. And the complex way of cooking a turkey is really something. On the platform was a glistening stove, a table with every known appliance. There was a cupboard full of a great many spices. Not all the spices. Just the ones a woman could understand and

accept. The moral ones. I started calling for things. Each new thing I called for, the Domestic Science Editor would hand me, and everything she handed me brought out a howl of delight from the women. Finally I had the stuffing all made. They subsided from their mad, Bacchic laughter long enough to howl for the stuff to be passed around. Wanted to smell it and laugh some more, I guess. I handed the bowl to the Domestic Science gal and she gave it to a woman in the first row. They started to pass it around. I went to work on the turkey. Kind of a complicated deal, fixing the bird to receive the dressing. Halfway through I noticed the place was kind of still. I looked up and called for the bowl of stuffing. It came up to the platform in perfect silence. It was empty. They'd eaten it raw.

I quit fixing the turkey, said a few words about how to complete the job, summed them all up in a stare, and went on out. I'm not reciting a personal triumph. I'm recounting a feminine defeat. They just didn't have anything to say, and they weren't laughing any more. They'd eaten that whole damned bowlful of dressing raw. I'm not saying that by the next day they hadn't half of them squirmed virtuously out of it by deciding I was an immoral sort of person even to know about such goings on and God help the daughter of any woman who was allowed to go out with me. And 40 per cent of the other half, prodded, would admit that it was a nice enough dish, all right, but nobody had time to spend on such heathen goings on and if I had to cook three meals a day I'd soon find out. This latter darkling saying is the defense women have successfully opposed to fine cooking ever since they found they could work on a man's pity and get away with it.

Anyway, next year a very decent percentage of those who read the "How to Cook a Turkey" column actually tried it out. It was reprinted in a booklet by a publishing firm. And subsequently Chryson's, a high-toned card and jewelry establishment, bought the right to publish it as a holiday booklet.

The thing is, all this took five years.

So I won't go into cookery and food any more, right this minute. As I say, Benchley's got all the material on a cookbook I've been meaning to bring out—a cookbook for men. It's called *The Naked Countess,* and the title was furnished by J. B. Priestley on the grounds that as a title it was perfect—sex, romance, aristocracy, mystery, and challenge—and Benchley has already written the preface for it, as you will find by consulting the beginning of *this* book, and Walt Disney has promised to do the illustrations if I promise to put in one recipe where the turkey ends up by cooking the cook and putting same into the oven.

But here's the column on How to Cook a Turkey. And if *you* have to read it for five years, he said bitterly, before you get around to taking it seriously, I'll be very happy. Just so you try it. This is exactly how the last edition ran:

How to Cook a Turkey

Apollonius of Agrifolio wrote: "The will to enjoy and the will to create are the two sides of a triangle whose base is the will to execute and whose apex is the substance desired."

Lucretius Pepinilla, 107 years later, in a senatorial speech, declared: *"Cognoscere gallinae, fornii cognoscite, et cognoscite cocinae tuae."*

The wise and immortal Gisantius Praceptus, advising Constantia de' Medici, observed: *"Giammia permetti uno marinaro ottenere uno dito sopra vostra ginocchio!"*

Through the ages innumerable other great and sage men have said as much, and more.

If you want a well-cooked dinner the labor of preparing must be equal to the pleasure of your enjoying. If the labor is greater, the solace is less. If the labor is trifling, so also will be your pleasure. The path from the kitchen to the dining room is a short road—not so long as happiness, nor so short as a dyspeptic's smile. In your preparations for that walk remember these things and rejoice in knowing that no merchant and no wizard can offer for sale or gift or loan your own labor, the priceless ingredient implicit in whatever food you serve.

I have found it unwise to buy a turkey from a roadside farm. Many honest farmers raise their own and raise them well; some racketeers buy up worthless birds for the holiday occasion, put up a sign reading: "Honest Hiram's Turkey Ranch—Turkeys Cheap!" and move elsewhere on the day after Thanksgiving or Christmas. But even if you know your farmer, be sure to let your bird rest a day or so or three or four after it has been killed. Fresh-killed meat of almost any kind is the most undesirable, least digestible, toughest, least flavorsome of comestibles. There was a time when freshness was a warrant against impurity—when meat left standing collected germs and was unhealthy. People put up with the toughness and bad flavor as the least of two evils. This is a day of rigidly supervised packing and refrigeration. Disease dangers in kept meats are entirely over, providing you allow Common

Sense to keep as strong a hand on your purse as Thrift.

The turkey should be not less than sixteen pounds and not more than twenty-two. If it is eighteen pounds or more, buy a hen. You will get more breast. I buy mine from a butcher—usually in some large market. I get a better price as a rule, and I know it has been properly kept. When he eliminates the head see that he chops it off so as to leave as much neck as possible. Have him peel back the neck skin and remove the neck from under the skin, close as possible to the shoulders. The tube of neck skin thus left will be admirable for stuffing with whatever stuffing is left over. When he cleans the bird have him make a small opening and skewer it shut, using string between the pegs, like old-fashioned lace shoes or a peasant bodice.

Rub the bird inside and out with salt and pepper. In a stewpan put the chopped gizzard and the neck and heart, to which add one bay leaf, one teaspoon of paprika, a half teaspoon of coriander, a clove of garlic, four cups of water, and salt to taste. Let this simmer while you go ahead with the dressing.

Dice the apple, one orange, in a bowl and add to this bowl a large can of crushed pineapple, the grated rind of one half lemon, one can of drained water chestnuts, three tablespoons of chopped, preserved ginger.

In another bowl put two teaspoons of Colman's mustard, two teaspoons of caraway seed, three teaspoons of celery seed, two teaspoons of poppy seed, two and a half teaspoons of orégano, one well-crushed large bay leaf, one teaspoon black pepper, one half teaspoon of mace, four tablespoons of well-chopped parsley, four or five finely minced cloves of garlic, four cloves, minus the heads and well chopped, one half

teaspoon of turmeric, four large, well-chopped onions, six well-chopped stalks of celery, one half teaspoon marjoram, one half teaspoon savory (summer savory if you can get it), and one tablespoon of poultry seasoning. Some like sage, some like thyme. Nobody, apparently, objects to poultry seasoning, which, ironically, contains both. Salt to taste.

In another bowl dump three packages of bread crumbs, bought at a bakery. Add to this three quarters of a pound of ground veal and one quarter of a pound of ground fresh pork and a quarter of a pound of butter and all the fat (first rendered) you have been able to find and pry loose from the turkey. Mix in each bowl the contents of each bowl. When each bowl is well mixed, mix the three of them together. And mix it well. Mix it with your hands. Mix it until your forearms and wrists ache. Then mix it some more. Now toss it enough so that it isn't any longer a doughy mass.

Stuff your turkey, but not too full. Pretty full, though. Stuff the neck and tie the end. Skewer the bird. Tie the strings. Turn on your oven full force and let it get red hot. Put your bird on the drip pan, or, best of all, breast down in a rack. In a cup make a paste consisting of the yolks of two eggs, a teaspoon of Colman's mustard, a clove of minced garlic, a tablespoon of onion juice (run an onion through your chopper and catch the juice), a half teaspoon of salt, two pinches of cayenne pepper, a teaspoon of lemon juice, and enough sifted flour to make a stiff paste. Take a pastry brush or an ordinary big paintbrush and stand by.

Put your bird into the red-hot oven. Let it brown all over. Remove the turkey. Turn your oven down to 325 degrees. Now, while the turkey is sizzling hot, paint it

completely all over with the paste. Put it back in the oven. The paste will have set in a few minutes. Drag it out again. Paint every nook and cranny of it once more. Put it back in the oven. Keep doing this until you haven't any more paste left.

To the giblet-neck-liver-heart gravy that has been simmering add one cup of cider. Don't let it cook any more. Stir it well. Keep it warm on top of the oven. This is your basting fluid. Baste the bird every fifteen minutes! That means you will baste it from twelve to fifteen times. After the bird has cooked about an hour and a half turn it on its stomach, back in the air, and let it cook in that position until the last fifteen minutes, when you restore it to its back again. That is, unless you use a rack. If you use a rack don't turn it on its back until the last half hour. It ought to cook at least four hours and a half to five hours and a half.

When you remove it the turkey will be dead black. You will think, "My God! I have ruined it." Be calm. Take a tweezer and pry loose the paste coating. It will come off readily. Beneath this burnt, harmless, now worthless shell the bird will be golden and dark brown, succulent, giddy-making with wild aromas, crisp and crunchable and crackling. The meat beneath this crazing panorama of lip-wetting skin will be wet, juice will spurt from it in tiny fountains high as the handle of the fork plunged into it; the meat will be white, crammed with mocking flavor, delirious with things that rush over your palate and are drowned and gone as fast as you can swallow; cut a little of it with a spoon, it will spread on bread as eagerly and readily as soft wurst.

You do not have to be a carver to eat this turkey; speak harshly to it and it will fall apart.

This is the end of it. All but the dressing. No pen, unless it were filled with Thompson's gravy, can describe Thompson's dressing, and there is not paper enough in the world to contain the thoughts and adjectives it would set down, and not marble enough to serve for its monuments.

Chapter XIII

To the human mind there is nothing more appalling than the prospect that the world functions without a plan; such a prospect would be worse than living, and it usually is.
(From the diary of Joe, the Wounded Tennis Player)

Thus far this book has been anecdotal, the quilled quiverings of a man entering his mementopause. The things I remember are a patchwork quilt composed of snips of human living collected as the mind collects things, which is to say at random. It is in this way a column is written.

But it is a form which is not in convention: a book must have a beginning and a middle and an end. It must, further, have a hero or heroine with whom the reader can identify himself or herself. And it must set out to teach a lesson.

In this respect books are not like this, and not at all like columns. For life has no beginning and no end, and there are even people who say it has no discernible purpose, and certainly in life there are no heroes or heroines with whom our morning-paper vanity permits us to identify ourselves. And the same sort of thing may be said about columns.

The whole trouble with life and columns is that interesting and absorbing things are never integrated. You cannot draw any moral from them, but only flavors and experience, and the experience teaches you nothing as a rule except that life is not integrated and

that somewhere somebody is playing somebody a hell of a dirty trick.

But I should not like to feel that this book is idle. It has purpose, even if its purpose is merely to tell how to write a column and how a column is written and what a columnist thinks and what things he remembers. One of the most stimulating incidents in my life, and perhaps the thing that made me determine to write, fused me in it, was no textbook at all but simply the sight of a woman putting a feather in a man's hand. I was quite young then, it was 1918, and it took place outside of Park and Tilford's in New York, when Park and Tilford's stood on the corner of Twenty-sixth Street and Fifth Avenue.

The man was just standing there, swinging a cane. The woman came up to him, surveyed him from head to foot, inspected his civilian clothes with withering scorn. It was wartime. Feelings ran high; men were in uniform everywhere. The woman blasted him silently with her eyes, up and down, and abruptly and deliberately she spat at his feet. I watched, fascinated. I had never seen a woman spit before. She looked up from spitting, she looked him in the eye, then she went through her handbag and produced a feather.

"You look fine!" she said. "You really look like a fine sample of manhood!"

The man never said a word. When she spoke he started slightly.

She put the feather in his hand. He grasped it automatically. Then she walked off.

She had hardly left when the man's wife came out.

"What have you got there?" she asked.

"Hello," he said. His whole face smiled. "I don't know. Some nice woman gave it to me."

The woman took the white feather away from him. She threw it furiously in the gutter. Then she took his arm and they walked slowly down the street together. She was smiling up at him and hugging his arm. His cane went tap-tap against the pavement as though he had been blinded so recently he couldn't realize that he didn't need the cane when she was there to lead him.

Now that scene and its stimulus made me resolve once and for all that someday I would be a writer. I simply had to tell it to someone. If someone had given me a textbook on how to become a writer it would not have stimulated me in the slightest.

The kind of column I like has perpetually in it something strange, something new, unexpected, vitriolics and whimsy, humor and recipes, idleness and scorn, and always, always sincerity. I think this sort of column most faithfully records the times and the writer and in the long run is best remembered and best received. It is a personal column. It requires from the writer that he have taste, humor, a passionate conviction in favor of the underdog, and a constant, a querulous letch for a change from yesterday's fare.

It is remarkably easy to write such a column. It is remarkably easy to write any sort of column. But it is remarkably hard to keep it up.

There are many kinds of columns. The most famous is the gossip or chatter column. All types require a specialized talent; the man who writes a gossip column must have, primarily, a sense of news and perspective and timing. He must be able to invest each tiny item with color, pace, and amazement. There have been too many aspiring Winchells; the market has been open for a competitor but not for a duplicate. Most Winchell

imitators lean heavily on self-conscious bravados of phrase. The essence of a Winchell column is a collection of red-hot personal items expressed with tremendous economy which gives the effect of matter released under pressure, and a perfected ability to coin slang and to say drab things colorfully. Every human being has color and says things in an individual way. Your way is as good as Winchell's if you can develop it and polish it and make it strikingly yours. But first of all you must have something to say.

Walter Winchell is, or was, the Alexander Pope of this era, and for his contributions to language he will be remembered as long as Pope. There is the difference that Winchell enriched language while Pope enriched literature, but Pope had many imitators; Pope had a small army of gossip collectors working for him; Pope was as feared, though not by so many people, and Pope, while more malignant, dealt in precisely the same personal items as does Winchell. Winchell is an amiable person, unmistakably Winchell, of a writing personality so powerful that even the third-hand imitation of his work commands a certain respect. He has probably the largest army of informants in the world, not even excluding the Russian or German governments. But Winchell's stooges are unpaid. Unpaid, that is, in money.

There is an inexplicable quality in the human race which makes them rush to a telephone to tell a gossip columnist something they have observed or overheard, even though they know they will get no mention but only a thank you for their pains; this goes hand in glove with another quality which makes humans rush to the scene of a ghastly crime or accident, stick their faces into the camera, and smile beautifully and gaily

over the corpse; I think I have never seen any picture of grim tragedy in which there were not one or a half-dozen fellow humans gaping hopefully into the photographer's lens.

No gossip columnist can function without a considerable staff of informants. They must be planted at strategic, news-making places throughout the community or the nation. Winchell's staff works for glory, is unpaid, is even anonymous. In Hollywood Jimmie Fidler has been known to pay as high as fifty dollars for a good piece of merchandise. He has had as many as fifteen employees, mostly part-time, panning the town for bits of gossip-column gold, with bonuses for nuggets. Hedda Hopper has a trained staff, considerably smaller, considerably more on the volunteer basis, as have Louella Parsons, Jimmy Starr, and gossipers of kindred rank. The more powerful a gossip columnist the less need for paid informants; many a prominent person, indebted to gossip columnists for silence on helpful occasions, has become the gossip columnist's stooge henceforth; many, many more, hopeful for good will, telephone religiously, sometimes once a day, sometimes leaving in the middle of a dinner party to seek a phone unobtrusively and relay news of a brawl or a bickering which is unaccountably spread in the papers a few hours later. The plain truth is that the desire of people to stick their anonymous faces into any photograph and their desire to read anybody's names in connection with any event of violence appears to be a normal concomitant of living for the majority of humans everywhere. As to the gossip columnist, there are some women and some men who can swear most obscenely and attract only admiration, and there are other men and women who in the same

VIP

performance evoke hearty disgust; there are a few Boccaccios, Popes, Martials, and Winchells who can describe intimate events in the lives of people around them to the boundless fury, indignation, and delight of their times and their contemporaries.

There are a few columnists who represent their field alone. Westbrook Pegler is one. Pegler's column is really a daily editorial, more vigorous than most daily editorials are in this worsening journalistic age, but hardly more vigorous than the more peaceful editorials rampant in every newspaper in America in the days of Mark Twain. The difficulty in writing a Pegler column is that you must be angry at something every day, or, at the very least, bitter. And your writing must follow a monochromatic pattern; it does not change from day to day, and its subject is broadly always the same. Pegler has this field without competition; the average columnar aspirant would leap at the chance to unburden himself of all his wraths, but at the end of thirty days he would bore even himself. The trick is never to smolder, always to blaze.

Column writing is a matter of temperament. You write the sort of column your temperament best suits you for; Pegler has a temperament ideally suited for his column, and he is limited and his column is limited to his natural temperament. Nowadays the times are a handicap to him; a man's indignation is a small piping drowned in the clamor of war.

Each of the great names of column writing in this generation represents a different sort of columnar expression. There is something about the column which is as American as an ice cream soda, or Mark Twain, or apple pie for breakfast; and yet there is a danger that the column, as we Americans know it, may be emasculated or may even disappear altogether.

Winchell, Pegler, Hellinger, Heywood Broun, F.P.A., and O. O. McIntyre—these are the great names of column writing in this generation. Broun is dead, a fine stormy petrel, interested in anything, a fine writer, a surprise each day. McIntyre is dead, the nearest approach to a Pepys we have had, with a trick of being perpetually abashed, perpetually staring upward at tall buildings, slyly able, a man who spent his life in an ivory tower and kept the change. Every columnist has enemies. McIntyre used to be proud that he had never written a word which harmed anyone and that he had not an enemy; he had scores who loathed him, even a few who pitilessly exposed his literary pilferings. I have always thought that McIntyre's pilferings were more naïve than larcenous, the detached pollen picking of a country bee filling a daily comb in a place that was not home.

But Mark Hellinger's column cannot have earned him any enemies, for the people of whom he writes are anonymous; I remember not so long ago his house in Hollywood was robbed, and when the fact was published in the newspaper five gangsters read the article, went their devious ways, collared the thieves, got back the loot, and left it, intact, with an explanatory note, on his doorstep, less than seventy-two hours after the theft was committed.

Harrison Carroll's column is reckoned in Hollywood as one of the most important of its genre; it remains so because he writes it himself, does most of his own collecting. Too many columns nowadays are written by everyone but the person whose name appears above it; too many well-launched columns are subtly and irrevocably spoiled by publicity service which aims to supply the kind of news the writer thinks the colum-

nist uses, and which in time slants the column completely away from the columnist's own touch and viewpoint. There is no question but that the service publicity men render columnists is beyond the ability of any columnist to repay and that this service becomes more valuable each year as the system of columnist-publicist collaboration grows more practiced. But a man must plow his own field in his own way, and he must go over his own territory personally, or else the marks of his ownership will be lost.

The primary element of almost any news story is violence, and the degree of violence in the story determines whether it is bannered or stuck among the want ads on page 36. The second most important factor in a story is names; for names are infallibly news. Gossip columnists blend these two elements to produce a column. They make enemies. The more embarrassing the items they run the more readers they will have, first, to witness someone's discomfiture, and, second, to see if their own names might have crept in, or the name of someone they know. The more readers they have the more enemies they make. The danger of such a column appears to be that unless you are a superlative writer you must constantly be capping yesterday's bombshell with an equal or bigger bombshell—and even if you are successful in this literary bombardment you will eventually callous your reading public and by the very violence of your daily assault rob the spectacle of its interest and glut the public taste. I have never viewed the exploitation of personal lives with any particular elation, but then, neither do most gossip columnists, many of whom write what they write detachedly, and read the column thereafter with some amazement. Winchell said to me once that he wished

the public would remember that he didn't *do* the things he wrote, but that he merely reported what someone else did; that, in other words, the offender was the person who committed the offense, and not the person who logged it. There is probably something to be said for the fact that publication of social offenses may deter widespread commission of the same or similar offenses.

The gravest sin in column writing is the use of a column as a whip with which to strike one's personal enemies. I remember my first lesson in this. There was a man whom I most cordially detested; I hated that man with one of the most satisfactory hatreds I have felt for any human being in all my life. And I lay for him; little by little I accumulated things about him and treasured them like a miser against Der Tag. One day I could stand it no longer and exploded the entire column on him. It was a brilliant attack, well executed, and it caught him napping and destroyed him utterly. The next day he came to see my managing editor. He was furious. I was so happy I wanted to die. The managing editor listened to him coldly, gave him no satisfaction whatsoever—oh, frabjous day!—and ushered him out madder than when he came in. Then the managing editor sent for me, where I lay gloating. He looked at me across his desk; then he glanced down briefly at the paper containing the column. He flipped the newspaper across the desk to me.

"That man hasn't got any column," he said quietly; he resumed his work without looking up again.

It was a jolt. There was no answer to it. I had come into the managing editor's office enthusiastically prepared to expose further failings, to enumerate the man's civic and personal sins enough to silence any-

thing the managing editor might say. He never gave me a chance. He just pointed out that the imbecile hadn't any column, hadn't any means of striking back, and that I was the victor in a magnificent series of crushing punches against a hopeless cripple.

Reporting long ago became an undistinguished business for quasi-literary accountants; a reporter today is merely a news clerk; he keeps his figures straight, he sums his facts, and he finds the colorless but occasionally informative answer, and he presents the audit to his superior accountants, who check his figures, tot up everything in a headline, and in turn hand the entire report over to still other accountants, who digest the prospectus, hanging from a subway strap on the way to or from still other accountancy occupations.

There was a time when papers flourished because writers, and particularly columnists, were allowed vast leeway. I have said before, what the public wants is news, not facts. Column writing is on its way into literary limbo not for lack of writers or lack of a public but because of the editorial policy of publishers and the remorseless rise, in newspapering's internal politics, of the business office. In most of the world today journalism is a dead issue, a matter of simple accountancy, a clerical thing, because most of the world today is dictator-controlled, and the things which go into a newspaper go there because the dictator wills it so and the things which are kept out are censored by the same dictator. In peacetime America the growing dictator is the business office or the advertiser. To decide which is the prime mover in this destruction is almost impossible; but what the advertiser desires to see in print the business office guarantees will be printed, and what the advertiser objects to is not printed. Only in

America could business flourish as a dictator undetected, for business is an American institution and respectable and a sort of pillar in our national structure, even though all the dogs of war and peace have lifted their legs against it. This ignoble act does not make the pillar unrespectable, in the American mind. It simply makes the dogs incontinent.

We Americans are great on respectability and most of us would rather be respectable than almost anything; it is patriotic to be respectable, and we will forgive a respectable person, and believe what a respectable person tells us, and act the way he acts and ennoble him until there is practically no living with us. In no other country in the world could laxatives be made respectable, or sanitary napkins, or whirling douches, girdles, and contraceptives attain such simple, respectable dignity; it has gotten so that if a man can make a softer toilet paper than his neighbor the world will speak of him piously and beat a path to his door and think it an honor to be seen asking him the time. Business is respectable and business has made such advertising children respectable by the simple process of presenting them as a mother presents a daughter at court. If the mother is respectable, what the mother presents must be respectable too, and if the daughter's drawers are dragging it is perfectly all right; first, because the mother is respectable and, second, because it is not respectable to notice things about a respectable person; and if said drawers are dirty, then it is only your mind and you ought to be ashamed of yourself.

Reporters are news clerks now; and columnists, unable to be anything but columnists, are slowly dying out. Columnists are fettered to no desk; they go forth in the world, and they judge and write about that

which they have judged, and their decisions make interesting reading, and they are never still. It is about these judges, these roving referees, that I am concerned, for I am at heart a columnist too, and naturally the decline and fall of the roaming umpire is to me a matter of intense and precise concern.

I am not afraid for the business of newspapering. Just for its future. There is a distinction between newspaper business and newspapering as a profession. I am afraid of a government-controlled press and of a business-controlled press. When a government wants to control information it simply tells a newspaper what it can or cannot publish. The newspaper then prints what it is allowed to print and to pay for the costs of the paper, ink, and labor it sells advertising. The result is a journal of government-permitted facts, and shopping news.

I must say frankly that I prefer this setup to the one the war interrupted: a newspaper controlled by business. Business control of a newspaper is just as absolute as government control. When business wants to control information its advertisers tell a publisher what news they do not consider helpful to the community. The newspaper then prints what's left over and the advertiser pats it on the head by underwriting its paper, ink, and labor costs through the purchase of advertising space.

The function of a newspaper is in its name. It is a newspaper. The perfect newspaper supplies all facts about a community, state, and nation, treating those facts as painstakingly, fully, and detachedly as a surgeon's report on an operation. Out of the sale of these facts on the daily state of the nation and the world the newspaper maintains an editorial staff and pays for

ink, paper, and labor. Shifting prices in commodities are also news of keen interest to citizens, and so are facts about merchandise, new or old, and all of this comes under the heading of advertising. A publisher or an editor must be a strong man. He must be so strong that his honesty is more important to him than his opinions; he must be such a leader that the only issues he ventures are truths—not his truths, not the community's truths, but the *two* truths that are involved in every issue. For if he dislikes drink, then his paper is apt to play up any story in which liquor appears at a disadvantage; if he is opposed to Siberians his alert editors will be quick to please him by shucking a run-of-the-mill news story to replace it with one blasting hell out of those damned Siberians. Every man is a bundle of prejudices and conceits but a great publisher's public can find no reflection of all his prejudices or conceits in all the news his journal publishes. They should find simply the undistorted facts they paid for; in a column reserved for him, or a whole page if he needs that much, they can discover at no extra cost to themselves how he feels about things in general and what his prejudices and conceits may be.

A newspaper is not a business. It is a living fact. It does not belong to the man who bought it. It belongs to the public, it is the breath of heroes, the free cry of the free newborn, the margin of justice, the day's report to the nation. A nation is simply a place in a man's heart. A free, a decent, an honest press is a representation of those words and, at its best, it is the representation of the nation and the nation's principles.

No one can own an agency such as this, just as no one can own a church, no matter how solidly he sup-

ports it; just as no taxpayer can own a government such as ours, no matter how large his stake may be in it or how greatly he contributes to its support.

In history, when any of the four estates have endeavored to control another, when government has tried to control the church, when the church has tried to control the press, or when the people have tried to control any or all of them, all four have shortly stood in dire danger of perishing.

In America the four estates are the church, business, the people, and the press.

Such is our national construction that, except in a few localities, it is impossible for religion to control the press. It is impossible for the people to control the press. It is only possible that business can control the press. On the day when business utterly controls the press it will also control the other three estates. The control by any one of the four estates of any one of the others means the control of all.

For advertising and business are not suited to the management or direction of this or any other nation's newspapers.

Print is still awesome. Printed matter attains a dignity and an authenticity merely from its appearance. In the public mind, however the public may in these days deride its own newspapers, there lingers still a wholesome respect for the dignity of print. The public is still apt to believe, wants to believe, to half believe, what it reads. In former days it was a habit to doubt that a newspaper account was untrue; today the public doubts that it is true. It is not entirely convinced that it is untrue. In the back of the public's mind still lingers the wistful and wishful hope that perhaps there is a grain of truth somewhere in it.

And it is upon this last disappearing fund of faith that today's publishers are drawing heavily and desperately, and in a little while it will run out and the source upon which a newspaper is based, the principle of belief, will be bankrupt.

Into a publisher's hands are delivered, upon the day he purchases control of a newspaper, the beliefs and the confidence of a community, a state, and a nation. If he is clever he may influence the thinking of those he serves; if he is not clever the Fact of Print will influence a proportion of those he serves anyway.

He may guide their political thinking and the sort of government we have. He may guide their health views. He may dictate a community's sanitation, its hospitals, its government, its schools, its viewpoint, its welfare, its taxes, its commercial outlook, its divorces, marriages, and even its burials. However small an influence a newspaper exerts in a community, it still will influence a proportion of its readers on these and any other matters on which it proffers an opinion.

And this grave responsibility can fall into the hands of any American citizen—or any foreign citizen in America—who has one thing. He does not need brains, good will, ability, judgment, honesty, or ethics. He needs only money. And because all he needs is money, and because he must have money, it was inevitable that at some day his desires and the desires of business and advertising would coincide and fuse and that newspapers would one day have that one purpose and pass entirely into the hands not of men but of purpose —the purpose of making money. It took bad times to make this merger desirable. We have had the bad times. At the outbreak of World War II business and advertising had just about taken over the American press.

A newspaper publisher can influence more persons on health matters than any doctor or group of doctors. His audience is greater, his staff's knowledge of language as an instrument of the communication of ideas gives him far greater power and ability to disseminate ideas. Newspapers, in advertising and in news copy, seek to direct the public health. To do this thing a doctor must have a license. A publisher is not required to have a license.

A newspaper's publisher may seek to influence the public's mind on questions of law, debating the rights and the wrongs of legal questions arising in a community. His opinion may sway millions. A lawyer must have a license to sway even a courtroom. A publisher is not required to have a license.

A humble plumber, before a community will entrust him with the repair and maintenance of its cesspools, must demonstrate his fitness for the responsibility by passing examinations which obtain for him a license to practice plumbing. A newspaper publisher may influence the installation of cesspools or sewers for a community. He does not need a license.

He needs only money enough to keep his newspaper going. There have been publishers who were proven idiots, proven cranks, mental cases, and through their newspapers they had a voice in the operation of their community's insane asylums. There have been publishers whose health fads were their own destruction. Their newspapers, containing their views, influencing their thousands, have had their say in the management and operation of their community's hospitals and medical regulations. There have been degenerate publishers, publishers who were murderers, publishers whose morals were an offense to their own families, fanatics, traitors, thieves, moral, physical, and mental

bankrupts—and their influence, their thoughts, their views passed unchallenged by any authority directly into the minds of the people who lived and bred and died and bought and voted by their newspapers.

The day is perhaps coming when, before a man is entrusted with powers to influence the minds of millions and the lives and destinies of this continent, he will have first to pass an examination to determine his fitness, like any other professional man.

I wonder if today there is more than a handful of publishers in all America who know even the Constitution of the United States. I think there are few publishers, advocating a healthful way of life, who know even the Boy Scout principles of first aid. I think there are not more than two dozen publishers, debating the pros and cons of some judgment handed down in their community or by the Supreme Court, who know even the traffic ordinances of their city or village or state.

As to truth, it has lately become a shrugging defense for many publishers who sell it as a commodity; I am reminded that there was once a Procurator of Judea who said: "What is truth?" and washed his hands.

To determine a man's fitness to handle the truth he should show as many references as a bank clerk is required to furnish in order to handle money. His past, his integrity, his character in the most minute detail should be subject to the most rigid and searching examination.

His knowledge of peoples of the world should be determined. His knowledge of their government should be as clear as his knowledge of his own.

He should know the Constitution of his state and his country as well as he knows the color of the money

of the politician whose advertising he takes and whom he backs to govern others.

He should have a knowledge of religions, for his own will color his thinking and his newspaper's policy.

He should know the elementary principles of law, for he advocates the election of judges and his is the voice of justice in the community.

He should know something of public health—for he can advocate the passage or defeat of a community's sanitation laws and he can influence its health welfare for unborn generations.

He should have a knowlege of economics and government and finance and medicine and law and religion and health and, last but most fundamental of all, he should have a knowledge of the principles of journalism. Given these things, given these things as a start, as a basis, cemented and implemented by a proven integrity and desire for the public welfare, bedrocked by proven character, integrity, and desire for truth, a man has a right to try to prove himself as a publisher. Such a man is worthy of the responsibility of a free press.

These are the things I seem to remember most vividly from running a daily column. I think I have said them all. I imagine by this time the hodgepodge of things I wanted to set down, the stories, the things that occurred to me, the pictures, the approach, the hollering and the leaky faucets, have given some kind of idea of an individual who wrote a column.

In this book I have had a chance to try to tell you through anecdote what it was like to be a columnist and what made a columnist tick and the color that was back of him in the stories he collected as some men collect stamps or yohimbin recipes or warts. This is a testimonial to those days and those stories.

It was wonderful. And if the times have passed when a columnist can shake his reader world by calling attention to things that needed their attention, the world is so uncertain and knowledge is so treacherous that I cannot know whether such goings on were ever for the best. They were colorful, those goings on. But one never knows.

I have always sympathized with the new-rich Hollywood hostess who, in the days when Mrs. Edward G. Robinson was collecting Derains and Matisses with a careless aplomb her fellow cinema-colony wives envied, decided to collect strange dogs, strange, pedigreed, wonderful dogs, and let's see Mrs. Robinson top that.

And then there came one of those wonderful dinner parties, and our hostess did her best. There was a real duke, a visiting English nobleman, three great writers on their way in or out of Hollywood, and a collection calculated to put everybody in their place for all time.

Halfway through the wonderful, impeccable, stiff, gold-plate dinner, our hostess stiffened in horror. Two places down sat her sister-in-law, a blowzy creature given to gin and low bodices. The gin had gotten in its preprandial work. The bodice had slipped. Her chest was getting cool. For an agonized instant the hostess tried to signal her. Eyes began to turn. Desperately the hostess half rose. She waved blindly behind her.

"Look!" she cried imperiously. "Everybody look out on the terrace!"

Everybody obediently looked out at the terrace. Sister-in-law, rapped smartly on the knuckles, fumbled herself back into her clothes.

The hostess relaxed and looked around. She expected that everyone would now be staring at her

inquiringly, wondering why she had directed their attention to the terrace.

But they were not looking at her at all. They were still staring absorbedly out at the terrace, where two of her prize little dogs were reproducing their species in as workmanlike and thoroughbred a manner as old man Derain or even old man Matisse himself.

There are a lot of things I haven't set down. These seemed to be the most pressing ones, the things I wanted to set down first. I wanted to set down a record of daily life and the things you come across. A fragment of writing to show life in our times. I wanted to write a long, long column full of brave cripples, and an extra or two, and a slice of ham, and queer happenings among odd personalities and a great deal of amusement. And what a columnist's family is like, looking over his shoulder and handing him things and burned toast. And a piece about the way of a world and a Negro and a forest fire for excitement and stuff about hunting. And queer stuff about horse races and how people act in front of death and a conclusion about humanity and its stature in tragedy. I wanted to tell about publishers too, because a columnist is a crusader and a column has to contain a thought which the columnist, as he writes it, thinks the most important thought in his world, or anyway, one that people would do damned well to consider. And, lamely, I wanted to say something about my fellow columnists and the sheer mechanics of how a column is written. The lowdown. And now you have been behind the scenes with me and we have picked each other's pockets, and the column, the long, long column, has turned into a book. A book must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end.

I AM GAZING INTO MY 8-BALL
by Earl Wilson

This book is not cereus, but, like its subject, it is night-blooming. Earl Wilson, Saloon Editor of the New York **Post,** earns his living by bringing to the people who go to bed at a decent hour an account of the doings of those who don't.

His beat covers any place with a liquor license, his acquaintance includes the most outstanding members of Booze Who, Actors' Equity, the Musicians' Union, and—well, there's the sweater-girl taxidermist. There's also the double-talk expert whose motto is "Don't let anybody." Or for that matter Greta Garbo, Frank Sinatra, Betty Grable, and the cast of every other show in town.

In this Baedeker of New York night life every bright light winks at him, every star lets down her hair and confides her most eccentric whim. Every curve, every waggish interview is recorded here with a wayward charm that only those who blossom after dark can recapture.

Says Wilson, "In crazy, cockeyed New York everything happens — especially now." It all happens between these covers. "Don't miss it if you can."

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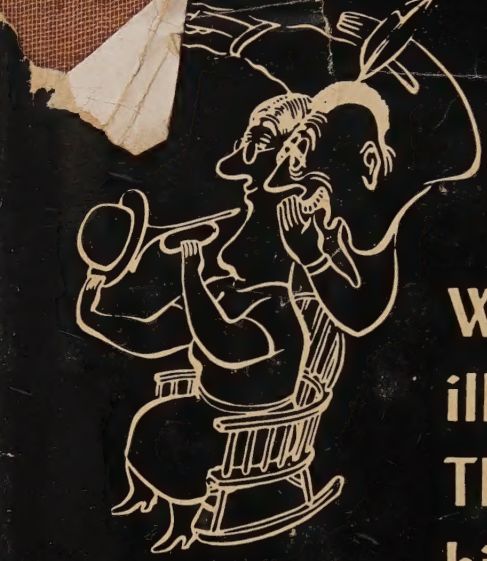
JOE, THE WOUNDED TENNIS PLAYER
No. 848



When Partch illustrates Thompson, hilarity hits a new high.

UPPER LEFT: The spirit of an Indian chief tells the author's mother to feed her children spinach.

LOWER LEFT: A bartender and a miner discuss how much can be raised in a pinch.

Of course there are more inside